The Kloochman

Jack Curtis

The Kloochman is an extraordinary first novel. Its setting is the new American frontier—Alaska, its boom towns swarming with construction workers, soldiers, men out for a quick dollar. And always the natives—especially the girls, the klooches—caught on the fringes of the white man's world, their lives crazily spiraling between two extremes: the short burst of summer, of flash riches spent in lust and drink, and the long, agonizing winter's night.

As the story opens, an outsider arrives in Fairbanks. He is a young Californian—a dissenter, an academic bum—seeking some large answers from life. Almost at once he falls in love with Nomi—an Eskimo klooch who is dying

(Continued on back flap)

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a novel by

JACK CURTIS

SIMON AND SCHUSTER
NEW YORK

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For

Richard Van Wingerden
All and Continually Artist

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the spirit clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious is never to forget
The delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth;
Never to deny its pleasure in the simple morning light,
Nor its grave evening demand for love;
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields
See how those names are feted by the waving grass,
And by the streamers of white cloud,
And whispers of wind in the listening sky;
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

—Stephen Spender

PUSS–PUSS

—Oh, Auntie, isn't he a beauty! And is he a gentleman or a lady?
—Neither, my dear! I had him fixed. It saves him from so many undesirable associations.

—D. H. Lawrence

She was there waiting for me and my good intentions,
A smile, a steel trap, a skull grinning childishly,
A gnome pulling a cork with her teeth,
A clown, at certain times a mad husky-bitch,
A daughter or sister, black lamb of the holy family,
A muscled cunt, and a diaphanous dusty miller,
A play of passion, an illustrated
Temperance lecture, the Lord's name invoked in vain.

Waiting for a man exploring morality
Not knowing when to stop. . . .

—Arctic Circle

Prologue

THE RISK

Not looking, or at least without seeing, Jim triple-folded a printed piece of paper and slipped it into his shoe as a buffer between a probing nail and the bottom of his abused heel. His mind was preoccupied with captivity images: with Gulliver's bonds, the Cyclops' cave, his own air-conditioned casket.

Every time he left home it was a gamble. As husband, head of a household, and soon a father, he enjoyed being a man to a real woman, and he knew the risk of journeys. Perhaps he would lose her, or she would lose him, but as long as the luck held he had to gamble. He couldn't abide, any more than he could ever be long separated, for surely if ever man and woman were made for each other this big-assed Swede and old Birdlegs were made for each other.

Family as a solid wall of a cube enclosing him was Jim Carondelet's principal concern that middle of May morning in Fresno, California. Juggling three blurred balls of socks, he faced his wife, who was silently weeping. Her eyes were swollen and red, her mouth a firm line of resolution not to make a sound.

"Look, fluffy Frieda," he said, hardly watching the balled socks softly sailing around, "I've got to go. There's no choice."

"I know," she said with careful simplicity. "I'm glad even. It's just that pregnant women are weepy."

She was a big woman, a beautiful, broody woman with wide hips, a great pelvis, by which mankind is measured, and breasts full and swelling. She was big-boned and red-apple-colored, with hair of a deep cedar red, never cut, and worn in a coiled braid as fine as a crown of jasper. Her face, like a harvest moon, was broad and full. She wasn't especially sensual; in fact, there was an air of decorous honesty about her which appeared as irreproachable constancy.

The more Jim thought about her, the more he loved her. Seeing her as a stalwart, high-minded Swede, he was uncomfortably aware that her passion was much deeper than his own. He was only a spry sparrow alongside this Rhode Island Red. He wasn't worthy of her, he knew, letting the sock balls roll down the length of his arm into the suitcase. He wasn't worthy of the child she would bear him. He was always hopping off somewhere, like as not tearing up the nest as he flew. Was it a nest or a jail? To her it was a nest. To him it was a jail.

"It'll only be for the summer," he said again. "And there's no telling what'll happen."

"Just so you come back," she said. "My watch stops when you're gone."

"You'll be busy with the baby bustin' out all over. Now quit worrying. Say 'rubber baby-buggy bumper' three times."

She shook her head. "I'm not worrying."

" 'Spose the fellowship hadn't come through?" he asked. "What could I do? Juggle raisins? Emcee the County Fair? Help your uncle fix washing machines?"

"You could loaf and study."

"Now quit it," he said nervously, "just quit it. Nobody loafs in Fresno. Besides, it's all settled. We'll collect the grant. Three thousand damned dollars in return for a madly footnoted paper on the relationship of the mal to the mute, the sea to the seal, the ski to the mo, the Athabascan to tabasco. . . ."

"All right," she said. "Just so you come back, Jim."

He took her big, capable hand in his bony fingers and tried to swim deep into her blue eyes.

"When I think of all the useless, idiotic women in the world, I wonder how I was ever lucky enough to find you, let alone marry you. There isn't another woman in the world who could possibly interest me. So cheer up."

He squeezed the scratched suitcase shut and held it down with his knee as he snapped the catches closed.

"There, that's it," he said. "Joe will be by in a minute. Any last requests?"

"Be happy, get some work done and come home as soon as you can."

"Send me a wire about the baby."

"Sure." She bit her lip.

"I'll write. Hellsafire, I may be back before you pop."

"I could hope."

The horn sounded outside, the cock crowed.

"You just take care of yourself," he said quickly, afraid he might lose his nerve.

"I love you, Jim, don't forget."

He kissed her awkwardly, picked up Baudelaire's *Journals* and the suitcase, and went through the little house to the porch, holding the door for his wife.

She worried because he never ate enough. He was nothing but skin and bones, an emaciated, tall, shambling, cock stork intent on going somewhere . . . so vulnerable in his crazy freedom.

At the curb, dark, burly Joe Casey was waiting. They were going to pick up his henna-haired Armenian girl friend, Kitty Cootchian, in Seattle.

Jim stowed his suitcase, came back and kissed her again quickly, nervously, saying, "Be good now."

"Don't worry, Frieda," Joe said with solid assurance. "We'll be back with lots of loot by fall."

"Goodbye. Have fun," she said, about ready to cry.

She still hoped Jim would change his mind, would say, Wait a second, I'd better stay beside my one and only wife, the woman I love. But he didn't. He only waved a single, creaky farewell through the back window and they were gone.

1

THE TOWN

JIM LOOKED out at Fairbanks, settled back and relaxed. At first glance, the city was as mechanical and mindless as any other. There were no more risks. Houses and cars, streets and stoplights—almost a safely sanctimonious Fresno. Almost.

The veteran Ford jounced over a potholed, mucky gray street into a different neighborhood of log houses in varying states of erection or destruction. Jim felt nervous again.

In every vacant lot was an old car body or the rusted remnants of a trailer or a tractor, useless machinery, abandoned as soldiers discard iron on beaches. Having lain dormant through the winter snows, tin cans, boards, bones, junk, were now sprouting up along with the new budded trees which were swarming with tight brown tits unwrapping green.

Joe knew the way. He stopped in front of a structure around which were parked, in an irregular pattern, a couple of battered and mud-plastered cars and an old pickup truck.

Like a flat-topped fallout shelter, the dwelling rose just above ground level and was completely covered with weathered black tarpaper.

"This is it," Joe said.

" 'Spose there are any survivors?" Jim murmured.

"God," Kitty said.

Gray smoke panted out of a tired stovepipe.

"We'd better make sure they're decent," Joe said to Kitty.

"Don't stay long," she said. "It's chilly."

They walked across the refuse-littered gray clay, threading between the winter-coarsened vehicles to a concrete stairway descending steeply to the basement. Joe pounded on the door.

A slight young man with an exceedingly large and bluish nose poked his head out into the daylight, like a lean bear coming out of hibernation. "Oh, Joe! Welcome." The young man greeted them with a sandy New England cadence. "Come on in."

The basement was partitioned twice to make a kitchen and a bedroom, but the main room contained three or four cots along the wall; tables, cupboards and benches were fashioned out of orange crates and piled with books, papers, an ancient typewriter, bottles, candles, nuts and bolts, and dirty clothes. There was a reek of close living. Against one wall was the Yukon stove, a fifty-gallon barrel set sidewise on bricks, one end cut out for the wood.

Figures on the wallside cots stirred sleepily in the rank, heavy shade, the warm and farty gloom. It had been this way all the long winter.

"Boys," Don said, "this is Joe and Jim. Just in from Outside. Over there in the corner," Don nodded to Joe, "is Fred and then Martin."

They nodded to the dopey, drowsy men in the gray light. Paperback books littered the corners. A deck of grimy cards shingled a pillow.

Out of the curtained-off bedroom came an indistinct female voice. "O.K., Don?"

"Hell, yes," Don snapped, his manner abruptly hostile as he addressed the voice.

The curtain was shoved aside and a nicely naked, obese lady, cigarette drooping off a heavy lower lip, swayed through the doorway.

Jim laughed soundlessly. There was such an atmosphere of numbness, of euphoria, of perfect tranquillity among the young men, as if to deny the presence of a perfectly nude, black-haired, heavy-breasted, round-bellied and blubber-hipped native girl whose wide-spaced eyes were uninterested in anything except her cigarette. Yet in a second Jim caught her watching the newcomers out of the corner of her oriental eye. He tried hard not to stare.

"Don't let her bother you," Don said. "Dorthy's just one of us."

"Sure," Jim said. "I guess it's just too warm to dress."

"Bullshit," the fat girl said. "They won't give me mah clothes."

The men on the cots grinned sheepishly.

There was no place for Jim to sit except by the black-haired, bushy-crotched girl. She creased at the joints like a fat baby.

"I got my girl out in the car," Joe said, remembering.

"Oh, for hellsafire." Dorthy jumped straight up, her all-over abundance bouncing lusciously. She bumbled like a dozen water-filled balloons back into the bedroom and returned wearing a sheet.

"What's the matter with you?" Don growled in his artificial, lordly tone.

"You all think you're smart as all hell astealin' mah clothes," she said, "but you ain't agoin' to disgrace me."

"Look at that fat little bastard," Don said proudly. "We really built her up."

"I ain't been outa here all winter," Dorthy protested. "I need exercise."

"I'll exercise your ass, if you don't pipe down."

"C'mon," she said, silky, girlish.

"She's O.K. for a klooch"—Don turned to Joe—"except she talks too damned much."

The others on the cots nodded a weary agreement.

"Bring in your girl," Don added.

"Just for a minute," Joe said. "We got to rent a house today."

As Joe went up the stairs, Jim asked, "You guys spent the whole winter down here?"

"More or less," Don said. "Martin just came in a week ago from Nightmute to work on the railroad. The rest of us been making plans, and stuffing Dorthy. She's sort of our community chest. You know?"

"Sure," Jim said. "Sort of an Eskimo box social."

The men chuckled and relaxed.

"We kept her good, you can tell," Fred said. "We even kept her sober."

"I'm goin' to get outa here," she said vaguely.

"Like a jaybird?"

"I can do better'n you guys," she said, her sullenness really only appreciative patter, her way of making conversation.

Joe was at the door with Kitty. She went over to the sheeted Dorthy and shook her hand. She made her eyes wide and bright, her voice breathless with excitement. "I'm so very glad to meet you, Dorthy. You've surely got a handful to take care of!"

"I sure have," Dorthy said, giggling a high-pitched squeal.

"Don't pay any attention to her," Don said. "She'll laugh if you say workers unite, or the world is round, or anything. She's got a hyperthyroid humor."

At that Dorthy billowed in paroxysms of giggles. She clutched the bed sheet around her rolling curves. A missing tooth gaped.

"We're teachin' her," Fred said with a straight face.

"Look how fat we got her," Martin said, carried away with creative pride. "Fattest goddamn klooch in town. Plenty goddamn bread and butter. Plenty potatoes and gravy, candy, peanuts, doughnuts. . . ."

Fred, with a strange, zealous glare, seized the edge of the sheet, exposing half of Dorthy's gorgeous fanny. It was round and grand as a prize pudding. It seemed to roll out from her loin and curve lovingly down to her knee.

"Look at that!" Fred said. "Just *look at that!* She was skinny as chicken bones when we got her."

"Now stop it," Dorthy yelled, grabbing unsuccessfully at the sheet. "There's ladies present."

"Don't let it get you," Don said to Kitty, slyly looking at her tight little behind. "We ain't got much to do in the winter."

Kitty gave up and laughed.

"Don," Joe said firmly, "we got to find a room before dark."

"There's a good house over on Noel."

"How big?" Joe asked, his brain already working out rooms and rent.

"A basement like this, and an upstairs with two bedrooms."

"Jesus, Joe," Jim said, "I'm going on tonight. You don't need anything that big."

"Won't hurt to look." Joe's eyes shone bright and sly.

Jim winced at the nagging pain in his right heel. He slowly unlaced the paper-padded brogan to poke again for a nail. "Let me off at a shoe shop on the way," he said. "I got to get this fixed before I fly out."

"Where you headed?" Don asked.

"Some village somewhere. Kotzebue, Anyuk, Fort Yukon. Anywhere there are Eskimos living the way Eskimos used to live."

"That may be hard to find."

Martin nodded. "Sure, times change. Army posts set up by villages. Pretty soon no villages left. Just no-goods layin' 'round."

Dorthy glared at Martin but kept quiet.

"You a tourist?" Fred asked.

"No," Jim said. "I'm just a nothing."

"Oh," Fred said, relieved. "Well, maybe you can find some villages along the river. Young girls and some fishing. But I guess you know."

"No," Jim admitted, "I don't know." He laughed nervously. "I only know I've got to catch that plane out tonight."

Outside in the daylight, Don looked slumped and pale, a jailbird's figure. His long hair was yellow-streaked and lank; his teeth were bad. An old smell of closeness floated off him into the cool air. His big, blue, battered beak obviously couldn't smell.

"If you don't get it, you can have my bed. I can sleep in the other room."

"We'll see you later," Joe said. "Jim doesn't know what he's doing yet, but he thinks he's going to learn something."

"Best way is to get a job. Make some loot and see what happens." Don spoke with some sense of heavy import, and a knowing grin creased his face. "Lots of guys start out just fooling around up here but all of a sudden they're hooked and never leave."

"I've got a family," Jim said.

"So's Martin. So's Fred. So've I, but we stay just the same."

"How do you do it?" Jim sensed Don's own puzzlement.

"Letters. We write letters, send money home. You know. Time gets away in the winter, and I'm still trying to get my union straightened out. I've got a kid twelve years old who doesn't know what I look like."

Don turned away, not sadly, but possessed by his riddle.

They drove back to the heart of town, crossing the Chena River on the south bridge. The river was dirty with mud and probably gold.

"I can't understand it," Kitty said. "Poor Don looks so intellectual."

"He reads books, preaches brotherhood and solidarity, but he likes it this way," Joe said.

"Well, damn it," she said to both of them, "don't you guys get any ideas of holing up in a basement next winter."

Jim rummaged in his bag for a pair of tattered house slippers. "I can't figure why a perfectly good pair of shoes in

California should hurt me so much in Alaska," he grumbled, kicking them off and putting on the slippers.

Joe turned on First Avenue facing the winding, willow-lined river. On the left were barefaced gray buildings, looking very old for their age. Puddles of water were black in potholes. The curious angular lines of buildings canted out of plumb disturbed Jim's eye.

"A cockeyed town. What holds it together?"

"Money," Joe answered. "Army money. Air Force money. Federal money. That's all. Pull out the troops, it'd be a ghost town and the natives would starve to death." He stopped the car and pointed at a little, squeezed-in shop between a bar and a rooming house. "There's the cobbler's—try him."

Still wearing his slippers, Jim carried the shoes across. He jumped when the door of the Alaska Star Saloon slammed open. A tall, dark-eyed native girl stared innocently into the daylight, half smiling at the jittery-eyed Jim.

"Hi, Skinny," she said. "Nervous?"

Before Jim could answer, a small, wasp-waisted cowboy with foxy eyes and a determined grin came out behind her.

"C'mon, Nomi," he said. "Ol' Ernie's got just what you need out at the wannegan."

He propelled her on, unresisting and giggling, around the corner and out of sight.

Jim stood transfixed.

Joe yelled from the car, "Hey, dopey, let's get a move on."

Jim peered at him, gave a little shake of his head and went on into the shop.

The narrow room smelled sweetly of glue and tanned leather and neat's-foot oil. Somehow crowded into the dark cubbyhole was a heavy, black iron sewing machine, leaving little room for the old, hump-shouldered, wary cobbler who was repairing a boot.

"Hello," Jim said.

The old man looked up and scowled. "What's your trouble?" he asked in a strong foreign accent.

"Little nail winding up through my heel. Could you get it out for me?"

Jim handed the shoe over to the old man, whose fingers were crooked and cramped and stained brown.

"Come back tomorrow," the cobbler said without looking for the nail. Just hefting and feeling the shoe, eying Jim distrustfully.

"I've got to catch a plane today," Jim said. "If you'd just fix it right now, I'll be on my way."

"Come back later," the old man said firmly, looking at the front window which was opaque with many seasons of oil and leather dust.

"Not too late—?" Jim asked. "I've got to go on north, you know."

"I fix him. You need good shoes where you're goin'."

"That's what I said." Jim wondered why he wasn't being understood. "O.K., make it later then. My name is Jim Carondelet and that's my shoe."

In the car Joe said, "O.K., let's look for a roof."

"I don't know—" Jim said worriedly.

"What?" Kitty asked.

"Doesn't it all of a sudden seem strange around here to you?" Jim asked. "I get a screwy kind of a disoriented feeling."

"Well, it was kind of strange seeing those fellows out there, hardly older than college boys, keeping that slave girl."

"She's lucky and she knows it," Joe said, making a left turn.

"And then that other girl, that tall one who came out of the bar with the little Okie." Jim spoke with a troubled heart.

"Just another klooch."

"But she was beautiful, and what was she doing with that creep?"

"Looked to me like she was going to get herself laid," Joe said.

Joe was thinking about rents, his eyes computing the number of empty houses.

"Then that evil-eyed cobbler in there—" Jim continued. "He got hold of my shoe and all of a sudden it seemed like he'd never give it up."

"There's something in the air," Kitty said. "Itchy air."

"Maybe it's rare air. Bare rare air. Bare rare fair share air. . . ."

"Stop it," Joe said. "Here we are."

Joe parked the car in front of a house near the corner. The bus terminal was just down the street and a block away was the Northward Building, a small skyscraper set incongruously in the midst of a wilderness twice the size of Texas.

"Close to shopping," Kitty said, glancing at the yellow-painted house.

Like most houses in Fairbanks it had an entryway, a double-doored little room stuck on the front to prevent loss of heat in winter. A dingy FOR RENT sign was stuck half-heartedly in the window.

The living room was in the front. Next, side by side, were the bathroom and kitchen and directly behind these, connected by a hall, were two small bedrooms. The basement apartment was big, but dank and chilly, a fastbuck rental. An outside stairway gave it a private entrance.

"How much for a place like this?" Jim asked.

"Two, two and a quarter, maybe."

"We can't pay that kind of money," Jim said. "Besides, I'm going on north."

"There's money that can be made sometimes." Joe's eyes were blank as paper clips. "Watch old Number One."

An hour later Joe had persuaded a confused, worn-out and defeated agent to rent them the whole house for one hundred and eighty-five a month.

Jim marveled at Joe's deadly efficiency. Once his target was settled, he eased his way like a praying mantis toward it with relentless nonchalance until the real-estate agent found himself saying, "Sure, you could do it at a hundred and eighty-five——" and Joe saying a little skeptically, "Well, I don't know. Maybe so."

They drove immediately to the newspaper office where Joe wrote an ad: FOR RENT, *basement apartment, three bedrooms, private entrance, close in. $200.*

From the newspaper they drove on back to their new home on Noel Street, which Jim realized would be rent-free all summer. Construction bums would rather chum up for an apartment to themselves than spend their money on small, naked, high-priced hotel rooms.

"I expect to be leaving from the airport at midnight," Jim said, tossing his suitcase into the extra bedroom. "I may never get back."

"You'll need your shoe," Joe said, "and you've paid your share."

Kitty unpacked some household goods and made coffee. They were settled and a home was made. Joe decided to check in at the union hall next day.

"Me too," Kitty said.

"Stay home," Joe argued. "I'll make plenty for us."

"I pay my own way," Kitty said stubbornly. First thing a kept woman knows is all of a sudden she's been sold."

"Wonder what I could get for you?"

"Oh, probably two klooches and a secondhand washing machine," Kitty said.

"It's your business." Joe looked away.

"I'm going to check the action downtown," Jim said tactfully. "You lovebirds can bill and coo."

Out of the house, into the still daylight evening, he was aware of the size of the sky, whose lower limits were defined by trees and rooftops but whose distance and range were apparently infinite. Yes, there was something in the air.

The sun was gone. A bluish cast blurred into the late light. Passing the Northward Building, he noticed all of the plate-glass shop windows were cracked and were patched together with scotch tape, bolts, sticks and apparently anything that would keep the glass from falling out. He passed a taxi stand and a curio shop to cross the street.

Second Avenue was out of a wild frontier past. The sidewalks were crowded with people moving along in twos and threes, going nowhere. Restless and gregarious, the strollers wore work clothes, heavy shoes, and nearly all were bareheaded. Many were natives, either Indian or Eskimo, or a mixture past all understanding. Many were faceless soldiers from Eilson or Ladd Air Force bases, or from Big Delta or the Den Line bases. Girls wore blue jeans, cotton blouses and colorful nylon jackets. It seemed customary to disregard the traffic, to jaywalk across the street at will. Thus the strollers not only strolled a loop two blocks long, but also zigzagged their way as if adrift. There was very little human noise, no yelling of recognition, shouts of reproach, laughs of joy—perhaps because the almost side-by-side saloons screamed in disharmony, their jukeboxes blasting against each other, all playing the same type of western, bluegrass, Arky, Okie anguish.

The potholed and rutted paving dug at Jim's slippered feet. A fine grime of the earth itself, a powdery, pale gray stuff which, as dust, pervaded everywhere or, as slush, stained the store fronts with gray streaks, like Navy camouflage.

On the raucous, two-block loop, other than one hardware store, one pawnshop, one clothes store, three travel agencies, the newspaper office, a hotel and two movie houses, the establishments were all saloons.

Jim stood at the doorway of the cobbler shop. A crudely lettered sign read: BACK SOON.

"O.K.," Jim murmured. "I've got plenty of time." But something worrisome was building up inside him.

The Dutch sky continued to hold its long twilight and the people slowly traveled south and north, east and west, shifting, perhaps, through the compounded saloons off into First Avenue, then swinging back through another double bar, weaving a serpentine thread through the half-night.

A beer in the Fairbanks Nugget, a look around in the Dragon, a beer in the Downstairs, a pause in the Aurora, a beer in the Green Dollar, and a look-see in the Pedro, a beer in the Alaska Star, a jaunt through the Second Floor, a beer in the Oklahoma Club, and a check of the Pussycat, a beer in the Tipsy Inn, a jiggety-jog in the Golden Spike, a beer in the Midway, a leak in the Far North, a beer in the Glory Hole, a slow walk through the Shamrock, out the front door into the Miner's Rest, a beer in the Second Avenue Club, a scuffle in the Ace High, a beer in the Boondocker, a leak in the Fairbanks. . . .

And around and around, perhaps fewer beers, and more walking, depending on how much money one had. Jim found the price of beer varying between fifty and seventy-five cents a can.

He wasn't drinking much, he was too intent on soaking up the strange, ritualistic scene: the jukebox noise, the short, nylon-coated natives, the chubby black-haired girls, the smoke-stained interiors of the bars, the mad blare of song, the background of khaki green, the eagle-eyed bartenders. The curious sky which refused to admit pure darkness.

He brushed near several fights in the bars. Suddenly erupting, there would be an oath, a yell, a soggy swing or two, a man would fall, others would intervene and the people would continue their rounds.

Jim followed the flow. He found himself moving along from bar to streetnight to bar, to lounging outside, to bar again, to basement.

Only in the second-story Flame Room, where he found an attractive stateside girl singing and playing the piano, was he confounded.

The Flame Room was an imitation of the deadly middle-class bars in the States: the plastic seats, the pink lights, the jacketed bartender, the cleavage of pretty Yoni Heavenli who sat at the piano bar improvising classic pop tunes, the mirrors, the deep rug, the stereotyped wall decorations. The Flame Room was identical with a thousand other bars in California. Even its customers were repeated, as in a hall of mirrors, sipping tall drinks, teasing Miss Heavenli with neurotic sibilance.

But this was Fairbanks, not Fresno. It was rough and hairy outside. It was dirty and shabby and raw and cheap and functional. The loop of Second Avenue was a magnet, electrified with absorbing generation. No frontier street could have been different: the aimless circling drift of homeless workingmen going through a night toward sleep.

In the Pedro a guitar player sat on a tiny raised platform overlooking the oval bar and sang into a microphone that amplified his voice louder than all the rest of the jukeboxes in town. His voice seemed to be leading a mighty chorus, his being the loudest cat-scream of all the cats.

In his mind Jim called the nameless cowboy Buck Orneri.

Buck Orneri, with his pearl-buttoned, harlequin, cowboy shirt, his yellow rayon neckerchief, his tight, striped breeches, his baby-blue starheel boots wildly decorated with white and red eagles.

A couple of older, sexless natives slowly danced the bunny hug, jitterbugging, however they did it, to the cowboy beat.

Orneri's fat and puffy face, even in the dim light and downward shadows, glowed pale as fishbelly. He appeared to be just able to hoist the weight of his pearl-inlaid guitar, and he was already flabby drunk.

He couldn't yodel properly, he couldn't make the breathy sighs of the love ballads, he couldn't really make the arching, twanging off-howl in protest songs. He couldn't even remember the simplest lyrics, often putting in wrong lines or unabashedly da-da-da-ing.

Indeed, having played a piano in small combos and done comic bits on variety shows, Jim was fascinated by his utter ineptness.

Buck Orneri was most impressive before the ladies. He affected sexy mannerisms toward even the ugliest, most gap-toothed and scarred old squaws who smiled and asked for a song. In a sense, he was a hero of the Pedro.

His ears aching with the electronic blast of steel-guitar string and off-key bellows, Jim wandered out onto the street and leaned against the front of the building, along with half a dozen stolid-faced, ebon-eyed young men who were loafing the light of the night away.

As the night grew older, Jim watched the pigeontoed, bowlegged Eskimo women accumulate a slack, glaze-eyed expression on their wandering faces. They looked a little the worse for wear, too: a button missing here, a zipper undone there, a hair-do ruffled, bits of telltale sawdust or the gray silt of Fairbanks on their shoulder blades, their heads hanging a little lower, their jaws a little more stubborn as they battled the night.

Jim found himself both attracted and repelled by the dark shapes drifting by.

Don and Fred came on the human tide and stopped a minute.

"I don't see how they do it," Jim said.

"Well, it's a rough game in a way," Don said, "but you get used to it."

"But who do they belong to?"

"The klooches? Well, anyone."

"Best to start late," Fred said. "Let somebody else buy the booze for 'em. Around about midnight they get so drunk they forget, so they're yours."

"Any of them?"

"Take your choice, big or small, old or young, just stare at them a little while, and if she likes your looks she's yours till you're sick of her."

Jim saw the tall, longlegged native girl he'd seen that morning. She was passing by, she was alone. Her eyes were stolid. Spit leaked out of the corners of her mouth. A bruise was on her right eyebrow. She was having trouble keeping her head up.

"Who's she?" Jim asked suddenly. "I saw her earlier."

"Nomi," Don said. "She just got out this morning."

"Nomi? Out of what?"

"Jail," Fred said. "I guess Ernie was waiting for her at the jailhouse door. He keeps a calendar on all the klooch."

"A klooch gets thirty, sixty, maybe ninety days in the Federal jail, see," Don continued. "Well, some guys keep track and try to be the first ones to take 'em home and fuck 'em. They call 'em thirty- or sixty- or ninety-day virgins."

"Then what?"

"After you get the first piece best thing is to dump 'em off on the corner and let the dogfaces have 'em."

"'Spose they want to stay?"

"That's it. A lot of 'em can't take a hint," Don said. "So then you get a goddamn stick and beat the shit out of 'em."

"That's probably how Nomi got her lumps," Jim said.

"Yeah," Fred said. "For a little guy, Ernie can swing a hell of a club. Some like it one way, some like it another."

"You lookin' for a klooch?" Don asked.

"No. I'm just looking, period," Jim lied. "That Nomi has the nicest legs I've seen, though."

"She's a good piece of ass, too," Fred said.

"Give her credit," Don nodded agreeably.

Apparently everyone in town had pronged the girl, but her image still clung warmly and mysteriously pure. Jim looked the way Nomi had gone, wondering about her, wondering about why he was wondering.

He was a happily married man who didn't chippy around. What had bothered his imagination about her? It wasn't her flesh, he decided. It was something in her bearing, or in her face and eyes. She was human.

He followed after her into the Pedro, and hunted through the noisy, shapeless native women, but she wasn't there. His eyes now were seeing individuals. He noticed their weather lines and the great array of scars. Faces were flat-nosed, they were brachycephalic, they were ochre and sienna, they were corrugated and gap-toothed, but they were not Nomi.

Dear Academy, Jim thought, this is to report that there are savages in the city of Fairbanks worthy of my expedition. Fairbanks is not fair. Is savage. Fairbanks is not static, nor dynamic, is parasitical, is mad under a nightly sun. What am I?

2

NOMI

THE COBBLER'S "BACK SOON" sign had not been changed. Jim fretted at the door, but it was too late. He would miss the bush plane north. All because of the prick of a nail. But there was something besides a nail nagging at him. He couldn't remember, but he knew for sure there wouldn't be another plane for at least a week and here he stood teetering like an imbecile waiting for an idiot. The hell with it.

He walked around the loop again: a beer here, a beer there, a little more loss of reality, a dropping of scrim screen in each of the stinking bars, peering through the smoke and garish red light for a particular face a head taller than any of her black-haired sisters. It cannot be, Jim kept murmuring to himself: If you're going to fly, take a plane. The night was now dark but starless. The clock was working around to midnight, and still he couldn't find her.

He found himself standing again in front of the Pedro with the same stolid natives in red or blue nylon jackets, dungarees, work shoes. Remembering his own lost shoe, Jim looked down at his shapeless, light slippers. They would never do. He could barely wade the slushy sidewalks, let alone ramble over the boondocks and tundras to get to his village. In the ranks of the bystanders, he contemplated their footgear. Railroad styled, lumberjack styled, Army-surplus styled but no mukluk styled, no beaded-moccasin styled, just little, broad feet, shod like Spanish horses. He contemplated his own long spindly legs, his own utterly impractical slippers.

"Sacre," he cursed, *"Sacre Saint Ciboire!* Where can I go?"

Rivers of beer rolled around through his brain. The jukeboxes wracked and blasted the Avenue with "The Flowers of Love."

He studied the gray sidewalk of feet as the singer inside moaned and bellowed. Buck Orneri, you are off key. A pair of slip-on brown shoes paused in his square frame of vision. Their light leather seemed to be mated to his own soft, worn-out slippers. He looked at the bare ankles. Slim, trim, nice. Very nice. His gaze rose a few more inches to an ugly, dark red scar on the shinbone. Not very nice. Upward, just above the rosy scar, the jeans were turned up, and upward on the long slim blue legs past the knees which were swaying slightly, perhaps in time with Buck Orneri's moronic beat. The blue jeans were not new, the knees were faded and even a little dirty, as if perhaps they had crawled somewhere this very night. On, on up the swaying knees to the swaying thighs. Nice, yes, very nice. Up, up, he shouted silently and gleefully to his eyes and gradually with great effort they moved higher, leaving the rich swelling hive of discontent, toward the flat, soft abdomen, to the belt itself, a stamped-out piece of leather dividing the top from the bottom, and the beat continued as the swaying continued, and he felt like a hound on the scent of a savage beast, the scent hot to his nose, the grappling and killing battle near. Crossing the belt, his eyes tracked up over her flat waist clad in red cotton blouse with little white buttons. Ah now, the swaying breasts hove into view as beach balls on slow waves rising and falling, tidal shorebirds, dunes. The waist was long and slim like her legs, but her breasts were large and free, moving loosely under the red cotton and little white buttons. The nubs of her nipples pulsed and pressed against the red cotton and again his eyes were locked with a swaying movement.

—Swing! swing! swing! O ye daughters of Polaris, thy breasts are like mounds of ivory. Thy breasts are like great beach balls rising and falling on tidal swells. . . .

He tried to raise his eyes again upward, an almost impossible task. So hypnotized in movement he had become that he himself was swaying to Buck's beat, to the girl's rhythm, and he would have stood swaying there forever but for her merciful giggle. A high-pitched, merry and free-squealing giggle full of fun and taunt. His eyes lifted immediately to her face. A gay, mischievous grin, almost like a rude and rambunctious clown, or a gnome—something so medieval, he thought—and of course he knew her as a person he had known all his life, had perhaps even known in a prior life or would certainly know in a future life, because she was a part of the love rune inside himself as even he must be a part of her. She might have been his sister, or mother, or brother or father, she was that close, had been, would be, except that she had materialized only right here and now at midnight, on Second Avenue in front of the Pedro saloon.

A light plane buzzed overhead through the warm night, going north.

He dared a look into her eyes and was caught immediately, the way flies are caught on sticky paper; he was unfailingly and inevitably caught into her soul through the dark-ember pearls of her eyes, but he was not sorry. He had by now expected it, and he felt not altogether dead yet. It would depend on him. He could do what he wanted with her, that was certain, but it would cost him a bloody sick price. Still, it was such pain that bought immortality and Jim was not afraid. "Darest thou now, O soul. . . ." It came into his mind as this girl's eyes came into his mind, familiar and forgotten and remembered again, as an aching pain on a rainy day, as a line of poetry in the middle of the witching hour.

O I love you in your eyes whoever you are you beast of a bitch of a gnome of a clown.

Her hair was combed down in a graceful swaying curve, and the bruise was still swollen on her eyebrow. Her chin was firm, lips tender, her face amorous with the incredible black-pearl eyes that effortlessly, even humorously, drew his secret being into hers and wrapped it in red cotton calico, labeled it *Jim Carondelet* and hung it on the line with all the others.

"Whatcha see?" she giggled. "Is it any good?"

"Can I go along?" he asked dumbly, humbly.

"C'mon," she said. "Inside."

Her vital, springy walk baffled him because he could still remember her staggering dead drunk a short time before, and then his mind lied to him saying no, it must have been another girl in another place and time.

Buck Orneri was bellowing the lyrics of "The Flowers of Love." Jim felt warm, enlarged, powerful.

His eyes locked again, this time upon her shapely, swaying rear end, which seemed to be the most perfect fundament he had ever seen. Her long torso rose like a tree on a blue hill swaying in the wind.

The saloon smelled sharply of ammonia and salt. The overflowing urinal was plugged up. The smoke was shaggy; the noise was a hubbub of hoots, hollers, giggles, screams—all harrowed by the electronic howl of Buck Orneri. The little round behind divided and slipped up astride a bar stool with a wonderful intimacy.

"My God, I perish," Jim said. "I am lost, and I see I am lost."

Her shoulder touched his. She looked at him dispassionately, humorously.

The beat stopped as Buck flopped down on his chair, a loony grin of self-love on his pasty face.

"What's your name?" she asked.

The yellow-haired whalebone Texas bartender was staggering behind the bar. Pretending to be give-away drunk, he was cheating and short-changing with little cold eyes.

"My name is Jim. Jim Carondelet. Yours?"

"Nomi. Nomi Mountain." Her voice was pleasantly Irish. "Hey, Ernie!"

Ernie appeared with a bottle of vodka bearing a label Jim had never seen before. As Ernie put a shot glass in front of her and measured it full of the colorless liquor, he said, "I'm sure sorry, Nomi, about this afternoon."

"Forget it, you bastard," she grinned. "I can take anything you can dish out."

"You just ain't a woofin', baby doll!"

Ernie turned to Jim. "What's yours, friend?"

"A beer," Jim said.

With a glorious, arching dive, Texas Ernie slapped a can of beer in a hole puncher, drove the handle down to crunch in two holes, slid the foaming can up the bar to come to rest in front of Jim who laid out two dollar bills.

The change never came back.

Nomi smiled at Jim. "Here's to the newcomer, may he never leave."

She was reading his future mind, before he had even thought anything. That is a disadvantage, he decided.

"Here's to Toynbee and Baudelaire."

"Yes," she said, and put the shot glass to her minutely scarred lips and, abruptly tilting the glass as if it were poison and she wanted to die quickly, she bolted the ounce of vodka. She held her breath, fixed a grin on her face, and waited for a moment to feel it kill.

"God, that's good," she said.

"Where'd you get a name like Nomi?" Jim asked, his thoughts revolving on ironic points. "Why not Lethe? Why not Circe? Why not Berthe or Jeanne Duval?"

" 'Sa matter, you don't like a name like Nomi?"

"I like it very much," Jim said hurriedly. "Are you Irish?"

"Do I look Irish?"

"Yes," Jim said. "And you talk Irish too."

"They say me old man was Irish." She was pleased. "Me mother was a queen."

"An Eskimo queen? Princess Nomi? No wonder you're tall."

"No wonder I'm so goddamned mad." She touched the lump on her eyebrow. "I got a temper. It's that damned Irish."

"Don't be mad, Nomi, I'm nice," Jim said. "I can whistle in harmony. I can wiggle my ears."

Diverted, she demanded proof.

He applied himself to wiggling his ears. She stared in wonder, grabbing both the wiggling ears in her hands and yelling delightedly. "Here now, stop it! How can you do it?"

"I'm primitive," he said.

"You're educated."

"But I'm an educated savage."

"All right," she said, "don't make fun of me."

"I'm crazy about you."

"I know what you're crazy about. You're crazy about a piece of ass."

"No."

"Liar."

"O.K.," he said, "but it's your eyes that make me groan and swing."

"Buy me another drink to wash the cold out of my backbone," she said.

Jim laid two dollars again on the bar top, thinking, I've got to get her out of here.

"Who's this Jeanne Duval?" she asked suddenly. "Your wife?"

My wife, my wife, Jim thought sadly. My beautiful big redhaired wife I love, I love—

"No," he said, "She was the girl friend of Charles Baudelaire."

A horrible hacking cough nearly shattered her. When the final spasm settled away, she wiped her mouth with a paper napkin.

"I dunno 'im," she muttered weakly and, clenching the muscles of her jaw, she downed the vodka. Dying. Dying down. It set her afire. "And I don't want to, either! You can have your goddamned high-toned friends," she muttered, and finished with loving the stool, she was gone before Jim was aware of her going.

Not running, not hiding, she simply walked away like a tall cat as Jim stared blankly and uncomprehending. He kept telling himself she's just going to the john, she'll be back. But she went on, slapping Buck Orneri on his foot affectionately, and through the back door into the next bar. She'll be right back, Jim said to himself. She knows she's won, she just can't walk away from it.

After several minutes when faith at last yielded to the cold fact that she had abandoned him, he asked Texas Ernie.

"Where did she go?"

Texas Ernie had to go through a long routine of pretending he didn't know whom Jim meant or anything else, and then, shrugging his shoulders, he said, "Don't let them huskies bother you. They ain't loyal and they're always around when you don't want 'em."

"Will she be back?" Jim asked.

"How the hell do I know?"

"Who you lookin' for?" a tall, pale bystander asked.

Jim looked down into his yellow Snopes eyes. He couldn't answer. The yellow eyes turned commandingly on Ernie.

"He's on to Nomi, John," Ernie said soberly.

John turned back to Jim, a wet smile dimpling. "She's working now," he said. "She's down at Momma's."

"Momma's?" Jim asked, puzzled.

"Yeah. Momma Arblick's. You can find it on Third Avenue. Go on over there. They'll treat you right. It's got a red light on the porch."

"Bullshit," Jim exploded and, twice humbled, hurried past Buck Orneri who was standing again indolently singing:

But then you forgot the roses so red,
The flowers of love I remember you said.
They wilted and withered in only a day,
And you broke my heart when you went away.

Jim said, "*Et puis? Et puis encore?*"

His head was heavy but he continued into the next bar. He had to have her. He thought if he could find her and take her home to bed, he might be cured of her.

But she was not among the yelling drunks, or on the dance floor jitterbugging to a jukebox tune, or dancing, or drinking in any of the bars he went to, and when he started asking the bartenders, "Has Nomi Mountain been here?" they would smile wisely and say, "Yes, she was here but she left with a dogface."

Once he thought he saw her across the street arm in arm with a big old man whose bent shoulders were familiar. He ran across the sloppy street but they had turned into a pitch-black alleyway, and when he ran up the alley in his tattered slippers, there was no sign of anyone. Nonetheless he heard a squealing giggle from the darkness somewhere.

In sober fear he came out of the alley and returned to his stand in front of the Pedro with the same silent, stolid group of natives as before, and from out of the doorway came Orneri's voice. He stood there, chewing gum until Ernie closed the bar at two o'clock. She never came back.

She had rejected him, the great lover. The Dandy. The Baudelaire. A joke. With a heavy heart he ambled back up the street, turned the corner at Noel, and wandered slowly toward the house, still wondering how such cloudless lightning had blasted him down and yet had left neither mark nor wound on him. He was perplexed by the roots of emotions that had never been turned up before. He had thought himself old and schooled and bored with repetition, but now there was no repetition. There were godawful patterns boiling in his hidden soul.

If she had stayed with him, or if she had come back—now that would be repetition. But unaccountably just to drift out that door?

Joe was still up, reading a paperback thriller. He stared as Jim strolled in.

"Miss the plane?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "Couldn't get my shoes, and I ran into a nice Eskimo girl."

"There's a telegram for you on the table," Joe said.

Jim picked up the yellow envelope. He knew a disaster was in it, the only question was which one. He read the words without giving a good goddamn, still in the spell of that pearl-eyed klooch, Lethe, Circe, Jeanne Duval. The words fixed on his dull agate eyes.

> UNLESS LOYALTY STATEMENT RECEIVED ACCORDING TO CONTRACT PROJECT FUNDS WILL BE CANCELED.

—There you go, Jim, you disloyal sonofabitch, your wife is having a baby, you have forty-seven dollars in your pocket, and why aren't you returning a statement? Because, by God, I'm for moral disarmament, I'm for The Flowers of Love, I'm an anarchistic terrorist in spirit, I'm an educated savage, I'm a broken-down fifth wheel.

What the hell happened to that statement? He tried to remember, but it was like trying to recall another era from a lost continent.

3

NEW AIR

IN THE morning, he slipped quietly out the front door and inspected the small yard like a restless bird dog.

There was a strong rutting freshness in the springtime air. It was coursing through his lung blood like extra oxygen, extra alcohol, extra thyroid, because, he supposed, it was spring, and spring in that country had to have a super double-acrostic zing to it or the winter would have been too tough to bear.

Jesus Christ almighty! He took a deep breath of the pure air, as if it had just rained, as if it had just created new hormones and new energies in the air structure itself. Sure as hell. They just don't know. They say air is oxygen, CO_2, water and rare gases, but they just don't know. If they would analyze air every day in Fairbanks they would see there is a variable. Probably the nitrogen changes just enough to drive life beautifully nuts in the spring. That's all it can be. What else is there? You should have been a plain scientist instead of a social scientist open to suspicion. A scientist is not suspicious. He just signs papers, and invents a holocausting machine.

He laid his hand to the rounded bole of a birch tree whose white skin felt so firm and budding womanly; he looked at the high blue Ruysdael sky, barely edged by a helter-skelter skyline of buildings, emphasizing that the whole tenet of earth-air might just take off and be abyss, a blue eggshell void, a sky without a world to worry it.

What a white tree! What a blue infinity! Cloud masses rode in stately and perfect composition, with gentleness and enormous pride and self-control, through the open cerulean dome—a sky so unconfined with birch-bark clouds, so near to the human heart, as to be new to his eyes. Such a sky had never existed in California. Such a tentative and elusive heaven was not in his experience. It set him to wondering that if he had not lived with such sky and clouds before, what else so great had he not lived with?

He gangled on down the gravel street to Second Avenue which now, after the night before, looked mean and makeshift, dirty and cheap, without any pride at all. Narrow, chuckholed, wet from a cloud's showers, his slippers were beginning to soak their dirt through.

Perhaps it was the legal hour for the bars to open, or perhaps it was the hour for things to begin, but some lever jerked the street in motion, setting loose the little bowlegged natives, pigeontoeing two by two up and down the street. The bored soldier boys. The native men, stolid, stonefaced, the girls giggling at a frying pan in a window, a dusty moth long dead, a tourist curio reputed to be of Eskimo origin yet plainly Japanese.

And why not, he wondered. The Hairy Ainu is surely the native brother of the Eskimo. The ethnic relationship was undisputed, why not then accept the folk art?

What art an Eskimo had, he put into his utilities or he would die. What art he had was in the gorgeously sewn parkas and mukluks, his ingenious sled, his bobbing kayak, his perfect igloo. God help him if it weren't perfect. But the Alaskan Eskimo, at least in this latitude and thin-blooded time, was not a kayak maker, not an igloo maker, not even a parka maker any more.

Being wards of the government and not having either game or solitude, and not knowing whither any more than the government knew whither, they marked time, like everyone else. Born to a status quo, they were obliged to keep it, not because they wanted to, but because no one had come up with any better idea.

At the cobbler's shop on First Avenue, directly across from the flowing Chena River, dark with the silt of the valley, he found the door open. Carefully he stalked into the dark leather-smelling shop where the strangely baboonlike man was quickly and smartly hammering tacks into a shoe. Jim was amazed at the efficiency the gray-haired ape could demonstrate.

"My shoe?" Jim asked.

"Got a ticket?" The shaggy simian hardly deigned to look up from the dazzling tacking of leather to leather.

"You didn't give me one," Jim said. "You know, I'm the fellow with the nail in his shoe."

"Which is yours?"

The rack of worn shoes was a revolting obscenity. The old shoes were so gross and personal and looked so dead.

"It should be here," he said. "I know it should be here."

"How do you know?" the cobbler asked without looking up. "You have no ticket."

"But I have no shoe, either," Jim replied, "And everyone needs a shoe."

"Of course. Otherwise the shoe needs a foot."

"There it is," Jim said, catching sight of his own personal and obscene shoe. "Right there on the end."

"Are you sure?"

"If the shoe fits . . ." Jim answered right back.

"I like a laugh if nothing else. Try it on."

It fit. It was his shoe. But the nail still probed through into his foot.

"Let me borrow a hammer for a second."

"Help yourself," the cobbler said, still intent on tacking a lovely row of tacks through a slick new sole.

Jim reached over the bench and awkwardly slipped the shoe over the steel last and struck at the heel and sole several times to clinch the nail flat and harmless. Taking the shoe off the form, he gingerly touched the inside. The sharp edge was gone.

All by himself he had flattened it out perfectly. All it took was the doing.

He returned the hammer and slipped on the shoe. It felt very comfortable. It was definitely his shoe, which conformed to his lean, bony foot, which supported him and sustained the thousand and one joints and their double stresses. Now he was whole again, a man with his own shoes.

"What do I owe you?" he asked.

The cobbler smirked like a baboon. "What did it cost?"

"It cost me a fellowship," Jim was on the point of saying but then he caught a drift of intelligence.

"Nothing," he said. "It was a favor really."

"Call it even," said the cobbler. "Half for you, half for me. Here, this was inside."

He passed over a worn, folded square of paper.

"Thank you." Jim took it, still wondering if he were crazy or not. He thought he should hate this primordial sonofabitch.

"Any time. Any time at all that shoe give you any more trouble I fix him for you."

"Yeah," Jim said, doubtfully now, backing out the doorway into the street, thinking the old bastard is having me on.

What the hell is rocking me, he wondered in a spasm of terror. I'm O.K. He's a trained abominable snowman, that's all. The yeti of Fairbanks.

Jim crossed the street to the Chena bridge and part way over paused to look down at the water for the cipher to his unbidden riddle. He scraped the guardrail of the bridge with the still folded page the cobbler had found in his shoe. Why was it now delivered here from the cobbler's hand to his? Why was it kept in abeyance until Someone believed him ready to receive the bad news or whatever was contained in the foot-smelly, dish-crimped paper?

All right, he was ready. It was almost worn through in its folds and where the nail had worked at it, but the printed part was still legible. He braced himself. He might be discovering sacred glyphs or handwriting on the wall. A little breeze ruffled the page: *I pledge allegiance. . . .*

Looking away in horror, he saw the tall, thin Nomi approaching and it occurred to him how Baudelaire bought thin women because they were when naked the most indecent of all women . . . but then Baudelaire was a wildman. Jim watched the tall, lounging figure with ambly gait, almost his own female twin, flip a cigarette in a long arc from the bridge into the river, which gulped it up like a swift gray shark.

"O Jesus Christ protect me," Jim said. "I love a devil, and if love is Love it must also love a devil, because there is no other any more to love with compassion." And suddenly he hated himself because he was clamping down hard to hold back a lyric in praise of dark beauty, and he despised a man who held back whatever expression he was born to express, and he spoke loudly.

"Hey, Nomi, thou Nubian of nature, thou simple doe-eyed Sheba, thou sherry goblet of a navel, thou carnelian Shulamite! Hey!"

She looked idly his way. Halfway across the Chena, she looked at him. Her scar-framed eyes were almond-shaped and sly. Her mouth was firm, expressing nothing just then but a mortal tenderness, and her carriage was of such essential significance that Jim almost slumped in despair. Better he try comparing himself to an enormously proud and laureled mountain.

Jim glanced to the page and laughed aloud. How the mind leapt ahead of the body's temptation, erased the execrable page from his innocent memory, and so goodbye the fellowship, goodbye the chance to sell his birthright, his patriotism, his love of man, himself.

He took out a pencil and scribbled across the page: UP YOURS. Quickly folding the page into a plane, he sailed it circling down into the churning swells of the dirty Chena.

She called, "Hi, birdlegs, who's your friend?"

Jim, in confusion, looked around. The near sidewalk was empty but his gaze picked up, far over his shoulder, the gray-bearded baboon face showing his Cro-magnon teeth in a broad grin, excitedly, even waving. Jim looked back at Nomi, whose smile was subtle as a bursting cabbage; she knew full well his thoughts and the cobbler's thoughts and the river's thoughts, and the sky's and cloud's thoughts and even Jesus Christ's thoughts.

She was beautiful. Lord Lord, such grace in an awkward world. Such an eye in blindness, such a smile in the graven death. O God! He felt himself falling engulfed in a love he had never never known, a love not of perfume and silk, not of a woman's natural and abetted wiles, but of her purity in the story of a blizzard. Were he in the darkness of a warm igloo within a gale of snow and ice he would have understood this flashing beam, but here in broad daylight in the rickety town, it was only a spontaneous passing comprehension which couldn't face the sun, and in love he was, but with not knowing why; not even perceiving what love was or could be then.

How had the time passed so quickly? It had seemed morning when he'd come into town, passing junk-strewn vacant lots, hurriedly cultivated and seeded to cabbages that were by then already rooted and sprouting up out of the warming black earth under volcanic pressure, the cabbage racing against the equinox. Already the sun had been up hours and hours. The long days were winding toward the point in July where the hot sun would not even set, and he was feeling kinship to the cabbage seed swelling toward that freewheeling sun, and this time he resolved not to lose her at least until he knew how was she to be related to Toynbee, to fellowship, to the overhead sun pulling at his core like moon to tide. This morning he had blamed it on the altered atmosphere, the excess nitrogen. Now he saw it as a solar phenomenon.

She smiled at him, waved her hand and even let her hips swing more of a curve for his benefit, and he responded with a helpless countenance. Indeed, she was still the clown, the gnome, waiting day by day for a man with good intentions.

She paused just a moment for him to reach her side. She wore new, if somewhat rumpled, blue jeans and blouse. She was fresh from sleep. Her hair was combed, her face was freshly washed, and to Jim's curious eyes, she should be on her way to the campus for morning classes. But the scars that fretted her face were not to be wholly concealed by a dropping wave of black hair, and he was warned, as she coughed dryly, almost politely, into her hand, that there was more hurt to her even than scars on beauty.

And she saw him in his faded beachcomber clothes that hung like tattered sails on the spindly masts of a derelict, a guy with a curious, contorted smile and a sometime twinkle in his eye, and a kind of shocked wonderment all over his ugly face.

"My name's Jim," he said. "Remember?"

"Sure. I'm Jeanne Duval," she said, starting to walk again.

"Where are you going?" Jim asked.

"Where can you go?"

"Up and down, back and forth, to and fro."

"Sure. I'm looking for my girl friend."

"Then what?"

"What do you think?" She smiled at his questions.

"I dunno. Do you work?"

"No. There's no place. How about you?" Her eyes were flat.

"I'm at liberty—"

For some reason she laughed and quickly agreed, "So am I."

"Nomi, where do you come from?"

"Why?"

"I'm interested in Eskimos and Indians."

"Nuts! If you're interested in Indians you're not interested in Eskimos."

"What's the difference?"

"I'm Eskimo. That's the difference. I ain't no lazy goddamned Siwash squaw."

"O.K.," Jim agreed. "You're Eskimo."

They turned onto Second Avenue and met a single girl idling along the street by herself. She too had the fresh combed look, a relatively clear eye and neat clothes.

"Hi, Ruthie," Nomi said. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Oh, lookin'," Ruthie giggled, slyly inspecting Jim. "Whatcha doin' yourself?"

"Let's walk up the street."

The dulcet attitude of the girls was not lost on Jim. He walked between them. Like moss soaking up thawed snow he took in their little butterfly gestures, their innocent raptures over trifles in store windows, their birdlike giggles and soft tones. He walked with them and forgot time and place. When they walked up Noel Street, he excused himself a minute to leave his slippers in the house. They waited patiently, with slight smiles and a little joke at his scarecrow physique. He returned saying, "I thought I was going to have to wear those damned slippers around my neck like a penance, like an ancient albatross." They giggled, and short, fat Ruthie said admiringly, "He sure knows a lot of words."

They continued the stroll. Ruthie quietly admired Jim and his consort Nomi. They all could have been revolving angels on a Christmas tree of delight. Though Ruthie was brutalized—scarred, fat, short, bowlegged and pigeontoed, gap-toothed and giggly—in this hour of walking up and down the sidewalks, she was a restrained and decorous lady. Jim was interested in sticking by Nomi until she led him to a warm den. He had felt the lust pushing him even as he'd awakened that morning, and with each breath and each hour of sunlight it grew stronger until there was no gainsaying or even recognizing it any more, inasmuch as he had succumbed and was drowned. He noticed how many other twos and threes were out at this hour, realizing suddenly that it was a promenade as old as Spain, as old as woman's sex walk, and as the twos and threes walked to and fro, up and down the street bubbling and cooing and giggling, Jim was aware of the great number of absolutely beautiful and young and nearly virginal native girls. As they passed each other, they nodded, smiled politely, spoke greetings softly and warmly with all the natural grace any woman in any salon ever possessed, and he bitterly pulled his ear in fretted guilt.

Sacre Saint Ciboire! he cursed to himself.

But a chill slipped through the pulling sunshine as a piled mass of cloud darkened the sun, and as they passed the Pedro, Nomi, shifting into another role, asked, "Can you buy us a drink?"

"Sure," Jim said. "It's early for me, though."

She didn't bother to answer, but simply turned past the inevitable bystanders into the bar.

Ernie was swabbing diligently, and a few patrons were already stolidly planted on their stools.

Nomi made a point of speaking to those she knew.

"Hi, Ernie," she said warmly. "Give me a vodka shot and Ruthie too."

"I'll try a beer," Jim said, fingering up three silver dollars.

"First today," Nomi coughed a moment, spilling a precious drop from the short shot.

"Thanks, Jim," Ruthie smiled, very friendly. Her round heart seemed melting for him.

After they drank and coughed a bit, the two girls ceremoniously put their heads together. He couldn't see their faces for the masses of black, wavy hair touching. Jim was embarrassed because he was the subject of the whispered conference.

Nomi broke it up. "Hey, Jim, you just lookin' for a good time?"

"Sure. I'm not lookin' for a bad time—"

"Well, Ruthie'd like some supper. She's a nice kid."

"But," Jim stammered, "but what about you?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I buy Ruthie's supper," Jim said, "and stick with you and you stick with me."

They were both pleased. Though Ruthie knew she was second best, still she was going to get to eat something without having to go through a lot of bullshit with some weirdo soldier. And all she really wanted was to be treated kindly and to eat and be warm.

As Jim slipped a couple of dollars into Ruthie's hand, she looked up at him intently, saying, "I'll pay you back."

"You never mind!" Nomi interrupted, "I'll pay him back."

And Ruthie, quickly cowed, backed off toward the door, her eyes alert and moving. "Sure, Nomi. Thanks."

Nomi waited until she was gone before asking. "You ain't working?"

"Don't let it bother you," Jim said.

She gave him a shy, sweet smile, her eyes dark and golden. "I'm not worrying. I never worry."

Jim ordered another vodka for her, which she tossed off. And as Jim went to the men's room, she picked up her empty red leather wallet, empty except for snapshots of herself in the arms of a variety of American solders, and a picture of her sister Frances, who was dead. She had a sly little smile on her face and wandered loosejointed out the door into the street and turned left.

Jim came out from the wet-floored latrine, looked through the darkness gathering over the oval bar with sharp disbelief. She couldn't do it to him. She just couldn't. Last night maybe she could, but not after such a fine, springy summery day. He looked over to the jukebox where someone had put a quarter in and was punching the buttons.

But she was gone, and for the first time in a very long time he did not smile. Somehow his sense of humor had wandered off with that girl. Perhaps she had stolen it; perhaps she would trade it for a shot of vodka.

His vanity was not all she had abused. His dreamy ideals of understanding for simple native heart were roughly undercut, and his half-considered notions of raising her to a level where she really belonged were obviously scorned.

He refused to persist. He would not follow.

How had the days lengthened, where had his money gone? Where was the night? Where had she gone? She had no money.

That was the problem.

He felt then a wormy, guilty hope that she would get the money and come back to him. You'll die a weaseling shitkicker, he threatened himself.

Buck Orneri, already nicely drunk, arrived as resplendent as any neon in town.

But he was not accepted by Jim, who was free, white, twenty-one, a poet-priest-soldier, an M.A. from the University of California. A man of responsibilities, a married man, soon a father.

Jim's black thoughts were not funny. His teeth were on angry edge.

Sick to the gut he nearly staggered up Second Avenue to the civilized piano bar where Yoni Heavenli arched her breasts and smiled a great white-and-bloody red smile at the circle of admirers leaning on her piano, with their cocktails before them, their eyes ink blots, their backbones soft, their ears stopped, their minds in smoky mud. Yoni was trying like a trouper to fake some life into the dim room, and as Jim entered, she winged her lips wider yet and sang a little louder:

Give me cake and a candy dooda doo da,
And be my Jimmy Jim Dandy, dooda daoo.

"Jesus Christ, what's happening to me?" Jim asked through a honeycomb of confusion. One thing was sure, slumping down along with the other broken-backed, down-shouldered, well-dressed citizens, he couldn't take much of this jazz. A nearly bare-assed but ponderously-buttocked waitress, trending toward the bored sick, took his order and lazily, using every ounce of her intelligence, managed to carry the drink from the bartender to Jim. He paid. It wasn't what he'd ordered. Nevertheless he savagely knew that he'd deliberately ordered a drink she couldn't possibly remember anyway and he had only spited himself with his lousy, waspish insight.

"Have another?" Yoni said, as Jim started to unlimber his way off the stool.

Jim saw the twin peaks of sadness in her wide eyes, made up like those painted on the curved surface of Egyptian jars. He couldn't frown her down, because his heart was a sponge of sorriness for the lost, and he said quite earnestly, "Yoni Heavenli, I love you."

Right then she would have quit her job and gone home with him because she loved him too, but he slid off the seat and said as farewell, "So do your best."

And so it turned out to be just another night for her.

Jim was still alive, still a comet burning from an overdose of nitrogen, and he was also spending his little cash stake.

He broke out of the stairway to daylight. The avenue had all the revelry of night, the electric signs of night, the manner of nightpeople walking, the night-shift cops in the Black Maria patrolling, but it was still day. He shifted across the street, avoiding the water-filled chuckholes, and, stepping by the group of standers by the door, entered the howling jargon of the Pedro, once more looking.

She was not there.

"Nomi been in?" he asked, feigning indifference.

Ernie pretended drunkenness, making a big show of wrinkling his brow to recollect.

"Sho, she's been in once't with— Oh, yeah, you. She was with'm then she came back by her lonesome, and went out with a dogface—"

A deliberate lie just to diddle the lanky newcomer, and the lanky newcomer was just astute enough to understand he was being diddled, and ordered a fifty-cent beer.

Ernie brought the beer, took the dollar and forgot the change.

"I quit tippin'," Jim said loud and savagely.

Ernie suddenly sobered, and Jim laid it in again.

"The service is so goddamned lousy."

Without a word Ernie skipped the palmed half-dollar back across the bar and left Jim sitting in a sweltering rage that the night was day, that the love was hate, that the wine was sour, that the sugar was salt, that he had forgotten how to laugh at cheap shysters who sold their pitiful souls for one-half of a dollar.

Buck Orneri was oblivious; he was singing again. "But then you forgot the roses so red, the flowers of love I remember you said. . . ."

And among the dumb, stubby, dirty natives, old and fat and ugly, there was even Ruthie embracing a blackhaired Neanderthal, lurching in the swing out, twirl, catch and swing in, bunny hug to Okie scream, dancing oblivious of the music: puppets, literary figures, even less than that, only passing shadows dancing together on a rough linoleum floor where it stank and it howled.

Finishing the beer, he got off the stool reluctantly and stretched his bamboo legs. He scanned the smoky murk again. There was no sign of her. He went out the door.

The line of silent, leaning men had dwindled to only four or five of the most hardy, the most sleepless, or probably the most homeless. One would never know from talking to them, because they didn't talk. He passed the bright lights of the little hole-in-the-wall bars and arcades full of pinball games and soldier boys and, as he came abreast of the Bonanza, she stepped out into his path. She was stepping heavily, but not lurching, her bright eyes were dim, but not yet dead.

"Hi," she said thickly. "Hi, Jimbo, where you been?" She smiled a kookie mischievous smile.

"Around," Jim said, attempting coldness. "You?"

"Up and down, to and fro. Let's have a drink."

"I'm fresh out of the wherewithal."

"The what?" she giggled crazily.

Jim had to laugh with her. What a mad woman! What a pipedream squaw. She restored his sense of humor almost instantly. He was born effervescent; it was hard to keep him long bottled bitterly.

"Aw, blarney!" she hooted. "Come on. I got a plenty money, come along to the south side."

A cabbie, having seen this ritual occur a thousand times, pulled up beside them. She tugged Jim's stringy arm and they both flopped in alongside the old, gray-haired cabbie who wore steaming glasses and was thinking of other things —his bellyache, his family Outside he'd not seen in years, his favorite dog now long dead (an unwitnessed love never really known), and would his family disappear and die the way his dog had done? His kids, his wife, were they too as lost as his terrier he'd taken to bed in the mornings and rumpled the bedclothes around, and fed, and wormed and trained and all? God, what a hell of a great dog that was! Teddy Dog. And somehow Teddy had just died of old age, the way dogs die, and without ever a thought of his master who had come north to make a fortune for the family, but there he still was, and they wrote nice letters to him while he felt old as old Ted—and then this goddamned klooch was going to give him a rough time, he knew that too already, because he could feel her hand on his knee as she said, "Let's go to the Steamboat."

As he gunned the cab out from the curb, her hand moved like a mouse up his leg. He tried to squinch his genitals in between his legs and keep a straight face.

She giggled like a total fool. "Hi, neighbor, how they hangin'?"

He gritted his teeth as she dug her hand in his groin. "Never mind," he said at last with almost a groan. "Pay attention to your friend."

"I'm just along for the ride," Jim said, trying to be square and straight, to establish a position unestablished yet.

"Sure, Jimmy boy, you're new," she said carelessly, "you're just learning. Oh say can you sing by the dawn's early light? Can you crow or can you howl?" Taking the pressure off the cabbie, she suddenly turned to Jim, and, looking into his eyes, she whispered intently, like some closeup movie star, "Will you be true to me, love?"

The cabbie turned off before a ramshackle ancient half barracks upon which a crude sign lighted by one dangling bulb read STEAMBOAT.

Nomi handed a dollar to the cabbie. "Maybe I can get it back, hey?" She laughed at the old cabbie, but he smiled as professionally as any toothless whore, answering, "Any time, girlie," and quickly drove out of the lot.

Jim was dazzled and dizzy from the long day which was now briefly night. She pressed close against him, and her head lay quietly against his chest. Jim choked down a groan of compassion. He enfolded her gently and protectively in his long arms. His hands found soft body wilting against him as if he were the last wall to lean upon, and perhaps in that moment he was the last, the only refuge from the dragon that blazed fireballs down into her eyes: a moment of perfect rapport and true human essence. Certainly the lust was not there as it had been earlier. Their coming together was a conjunction of one and one making two, and two are stronger than one and one making beauty. The circle was completely made of their two incomplete arcs so that a new rhythm, warm as fresh blood, flowed in the round complete web which was the two of them.

She coughed sharply in the hollow of his throat, and pulled away. "C'mon, Jaimie boy, let's get a drink."

"Let's go home," he said.

"Pretty quick," she said. "Can we go to your place?"

"Sure," he said. "Let's go."

It was straining his friendship with Joe, but then: a Man must Be. And if his bed is his castle, surely he can share it.

"Not yet," she said. "C'mon in."

"Now look, darling Nomi, I'll go along, but goddamn you if you get stoned and leave me."

"No, Jaimie, I'm going with you." She giggled. "Honestly. Have you got any money?"

"A couple of bucks."

"That's all right, honey," she said. "I've got aplenty."

He dared not wonder how only three or four hours ago she had nothing and now could unpocket, as a child uncaring, a sheaf of bills.

He followed her into the wooden shack, the pure Alaska saloon. A plain pine-board bar with a few uncomplicated bottles behind it, bourbon or vodka, a beer box and an openly avaricious bartender. Extending from the bar was the little dance floor presided over by Buck Orneri who every morning moved along with the rest of the town tipplers to the after-hours south side.

There was no ventilation. One could get high just standing inside breathing the used-up alcoholic breath and secondhand cigarette smoke. The dance floor was packed with a barely moving mass.

Jim knew he could never hold out all night, though some strange fervor engendered by the hot, screaming people pressing together in the dark, boxy room lighted him off. Jim had given up trying to consider. He abandoned himself to Bacchus, and with hardly any effort at all let himself become an atom in the swarm, this mess of Eskimos, Indians, soldiers, construction bums, and a thousand and one crossbreeds, this stew of rapacious barkeeps and utterly uncaring customers, who by now were floating irrevocably on the tide of alcohol in a night sea. Occasionally a temper flared briefly and a crunching blow could be heard, but the atoms were too stupefied now to carry any action farther than a small whitecap in a beautiful moonlit sea of vodka and beer.

Nomi was slipping into a drugged and exhausted stupor, and Jim went along with her, going along drunker, higher, stupider; dancing with her holding her so close his heart stopped a beat, his lungs barely lifting to breathe the heady atmosphere. Once he'd thought it was excess nitrogen, now, O good Lord, O *Sacre Saint Ciboire,* what was it in this box? It could have been the cyanide chamber where they were so merciful in their extinction of the inept.

O shall I fear to live again? *Et puis, et puis encore.*

Where did it end? At one point a very drunk oldtimer with a couple of very drunk klooches crowded to the bar and, after being raucously and cleverly cajoled by the barkeeper, rumbled, "O.K., goddamn! Sonofabitch! TIMBER!"

The bartender leaped like a basketball player straight into the air and swatted a big cowbell hanging from a rafter. Over the maniacal din, the cowbell jangled and a few who needed a drink looked up gratefully, but the rest hardly even heeded, and once the gong was struck, the event of Timbering began.

Calling in a pal, the barkeep started hustling out booze to everyone at the bar: man, woman, child, and the newly expired. It was like a Boston election, where the gravestones vote. Every single passed-out Eskimo in the corner got a drink on the table right next to his or her head, and the bill was enlarged with dramatic excitement as the barkeep, flushed with pride of accomplishment, and his pal, who was actually the straightman in the routine, went through a frenzied action of pointing and counting: one here, one there, him and her, and one for old Joe, and one to get married on. Jim laughed, and they toted and totted until they had doubled the bill, and reported earnestly and piously to the glassy-eyed victim, "That'll be ninety-seven dollars, Pete. Thanks a lot."

All told, three such victims of sudden wealth were fleeced for the benefit of those inside; grand drunks who disappeared with klooch in cab homeward to awaken in the hovel morning: what the hell happened, and a worrisome search for money long gone, and the stiff-smiled resignation: aw, screw it, another day, another hundred dollars—and out into the summer boomtown again.

Jim was passing beyond deductions and comparisons. He was in the totality as a grain of flour is in the batter and he didn't mind at all. Honor, wife, country were gone— He was a member. He was belonging.

"Time," she murmured, her face dark, dark as a dream, dark as love, dark as hay-drying wind, dark love, dark as man is dark.

"Yassah," a white Alabama soldier agreed with someone. YASSAH.

"Time," she murmured and, joined as a pair, they moved toward the door.

The cobbler blocked the way. Nomi pulled back, and Jim stepped in front of her. An expression of paternal rage twisted the gray-bearded visage, which Jim suddenly saw was backed up by Ernie from the Pedro, who was on the cobbler's side in some vicious plan. Abruptly behind him came, unsmiling, the bar owner, John something-or-other, an added, heavy pressure blocking the narrow way, and Damn my soul, Jim thought, there, unpredictably, was Don Hennessy just arriving. But of course he was a friend, and if it came to a fight he would, if nothing else, be neutral. And for Christ's sake, Jim thought, what next? As he was about to swing on the cobbler to clear the way and settle the issue, Don yelled from the end of the line.

"Hi, Jim! Hi, Nomi!"

His friendly greeting might as well have been the marriage sacrament because the cobbler's blunt chin relaxed and Jim watched him furtively put his iron hammer back in his pocket, and somehow slip by and into the bar without a word. Miracles were two-edged like anything else.

Ernie gave him and Nomi a toothy grin and pinched Nomi on the tit lightly and patted Jim on the ass in blasé fellowship, so that Jim felt totally amuck. The man called John was cold and bored, counting the crowd, pointedly ignoring Nomi and Jim. Don grinned an honest, jailbird grin, unafraid and unbelligerent.

"You makin' out?"

"Thanks, Don," Jim murmured, knowing he was beholden for a testimony, an endorsement he needed and had received. "I'll see you later."

Tired beyond weary, and simply like an old, punchdrunk jackass amorously following a jenny that has kicked his teeth out, bit his ears ragged, battered his ribs and belly and nearly broken his lips in sweet promise, he followed Nomi.

"Who's that John?" Jim demanded.

"Rackets man," she said, uninterested.

"What rackets?"

"Girls, dope, unions, abortions, adoptions, loans, kidnap, murder—anything that'll make a buck. Now shut up."

Jim heeded her command.

Already the day was started, though the sun had not yet risen. A cool light glow illuminated the objects around the parking lot where the cars were begrimed, their fenders battered, their windshields cracked, and they huddled like bitter mustangs at a Nauch Avenue tie rail.

In the back seat of a cab, Jim said, "400 Noel."

The cab driver indifferently chewed gum. He didn't give a shit. He had nothing to say, nothing to worry him. He had fucked a klooch for the fare a short time ago and so that was that. Another day another klooch. He had got the bastard his way.

The cab jounced like a dirty yellow boat, like the saloon, grimy and functional, having no meter, no nothing, only a man and a car painted to approximate the Outside thing, which for a dollar went one way (there was no place else to go), and for a dollar went the other way, plus whatever drunk-rolling or pimping you could do on the side. Its driver was fagged out and wanted nothing more than to finish his shift, to get to sleep in his room in the hotel on First Avenue and wake up and do it all over again.

Back into town, off Airport Road, turn down muddy Noel. Jim once in a while had noticed, as if in a passing dream, the stubby, pigeontoed figures shambling along the road toward town, and he wondered why they just didn't lie down in the growing grass, sleep, dream of caribou, seal and walrus hunts, of great feats and great hungers, but Nomi said, "You pass out along the road, you go to Federal Jail."

"I dunno," Jim muttered drunkenly, "I just dunno."

"What dun you dunno?"

"I dunno whether I'm a sub-paragraph on page three million two hundred thousand eighty-six hundred and eighty-eight, footnote A, or whether I'm one of those malemutes howling at the moon."

"You shut up," she said. "You always talk too much."

"Yes," he said. "But which?"

"Nothin'," she said. "Forget about it. It's us."

"This instant," he said. "Yes. Wolf, dog, meat, number. Me Tarzan. You Jeanne. Exactly."

The cabbie hated a spoken word. "Noel. There you go," he said, "Let me back up. I went past. . . ."

He put the cab into reverse and came to the curb. The day was coming upon Jim Carondelet.

He gave the cabbie money as Nomi got out the other side into the empty street and took a breath of the soft, blue morning air. He was content to have the cab leave him and Nomi in the middle of the street soaking in the dawn while he wearily and numbly looked at her, and after a detached moment of tumbling thoughts which never sparkled, moved closer.

She stood exactly in the middle of the graveled, chuckholed, wet street, inhaling the air, but not with the wildmare posture, only an unspeakably slumped head and shut eyes and huddled shoulders. She hadn't the faintest idea of where she was or what would happen, only that she smelt a fresh morning and loved the smell, the apocryphal, immemorial beauty and clarity of it.

The sun edged in from the right. It had not really set, it had only circled around and now was going to give it to them again right between the eyes, but Jim was alongside her, watching the sunlight liquefy over the spruce tops, and fumble pinkly over into the street, and he took her arm, saying, "Come on, Nomi, we'll go inside."

She never answered. It was, in most aspects, unimportant what she thought. She had made it through another fabulous day, and now was the high drift of it, now was whoever it was inside her and she inside him.

The front door was unlocked. It was only another step to his bedroom. He undressed her as she lay slack on his bed, her eyes closed. Slipping off her shoes, he saw her mutilated feet, lumpy, broken, scarred, dirty. Pulling down the jeans from her long body, he saw the lean dark legs as finely shaped as any in the hemisphere, but the wounds and scars! As if perfection in nature could not be tolerated. He slipped the old jeans over her stony feet and tossed them on a chair. She cough-coughed, the dry familiar hack. She was not even aware.

Her hips were fine fulcrums, firm and exquisite. He unbuttoned the little buttons of her blouse and her breath rattled as he freed her arms. She looked out from below a wave of dark blue hair as he let her lie down again on the warm bed. Her breasts were high as summery brown hills, her abdomen a plaiting of golden lilies. Yet the scars! The scars! Neat surgical scars on her stomach, tearing teeth scars on her shoulders.

Jim lay down beside her. He might have even slept alongside her through the morning and been content, had she not opened her dark shaded eyes and said very softly, "Jaimie. Jaimie boy."

"Nomi."

Neither needing words.

Her expression altered for a moment to a nasty, plotting ferocity. "You want some?"

"Sure," he said, kissing her cheek.

"But I hurt inside," she murmured, "I hurt awful."

"Sleep then. I don't want you hurting."

Her eyes unveiled a moment of surprise as she understood his feeling for her. Then sparking again, "You queer?" She almost giggled.

"No," Jim said. "Not any more than anyone else."

"You married?" she said after a long pause.

"Yes," Jim said. "I'm well married. I have a family."

She closed her eyes again, softly to weep in secret. "You'd let me off?"

"We're together, Nomi. I love you."

She coughed through a spasm. "Not just another free piece of ass?"

"Go to sleep," he said. "I've never seen anyone who needed rest like you do."

"I need a man, Jaimie boy," she murmured, and slid her arm out under his bare, bony shoulders. "You poor boy," she said, "don't your wife ever feed you?"

He kissed her, rising off an elbow and bringing his fiery skin and luminous bones down her deep hills and valleys. The kiss exacted infinity. He found himself caught in and extending himself into an embrace so gripping—so shattering, so crazy, cracking joyous was this clasping and buckling that he would never speak of it later to anyone lest some of it were wasted away in words.

4

K—

"JOE, SHE's human, she's sick, she's beautiful," Jim insisted.

"She's a lousy klooch and she'll wipe you out." Joe's mouth was firm and his eyes were on his newspaper as he pretended to study the want ads. "Look, Jim, go ahead and bang her, but just don't get carried away."

"She needs help, real help," Jim tried to explain again.

"Give her a bottle and a boot in the ass. That's what she expects."

"I doubt if she'll stay," Jim said.

"Count your blessings," Joe said. "Usually a klooch never lets go."

"A klooch is no different from anyone else."

"Your wife wouldn't agree."

Jim had no answer.

"Man," Joe continued, putting the paper down, "you're the one needs help. There isn't one damned job in the paper. Work is tight this year. I barely got on, and they used to bid for me. You need income, not an extra dependent, especially a lushed-up klooch."

"I know, I know," Jim said, "I know that, but I can't just turn her away."

"I'll do it for you. I'll lock that goddamned door."

"No. Don't," Jim said. "Really, Joe, she's a human being with a soul."

"She's a bum. I seen a million of 'em from here to Iran."

"She doesn't have to be."

"She likes to be."

"No, she told me a goddamned smart Texan sonofabitch who was just out of the army married her when she was thirteen."

"Take it easy, kiddo," Joe replied. "What's got into you? You used to be above all this crap. For Christ's sake, make a joke or something."

"I'm hurting for that girl, Joe," Jim said.

"No," Joe said, hardly caring, "she made her road a long time ago."

"But she had no idea of a road. These people don't think in terms of a single, straight road of life, they live in terms of a vertical plane of time, an enormous movie screen that keeps moving so long as they keep moving. There is no beyond for them, no planning, no conniving, no nothing but the here and now."

"So, you're you, she's she. So forget it." Joe got to his feet with heavy finality.

"Joe, if you don't mind, I'm going to try to build her up a little. She's sick as hell."

"Oh—piss on her!" Joe said angrily. "Hell's bells, you haven't got brains enough to pour piss out of a boot. I got to work and don't even have a family."

"I'll get a job," Jim said.

"You hope." Joe ended another morning in a frustration of indecision. Joe didn't want her around, yet friend Jim had a share of the house and could choose who slept in his bed.

With Joe at the airbase, building barracks, and Kitty working as a waitress in an officers' club, Jim and Nomi were usually alone in the house.

Jim walked the floor worriedly, trying to unjam his dilemma. He had never worried about anything. Things were supposed to slip into his life agreeably or leave. His wife was strong, smart, loving, beautiful, perfect. He knew that she could not help but begin at the beginning and end at the end, no matter what he did, so he never worried about her. His love for her was firm as life. It was unquestioned and infinite, a monument to the marvelous linkage of nature, but now he was in something that was not beautiful or benevolent. Now he was in klooch quicksand which had no beginning or end. Now he had not only to decide who he was, he had to decide who *she* was, and he had to do something positive or else cut off his moral testes.

He knew now the name of that shady cough, and she had shown him the photographs of her family in Anyuk, her sisters, her aunts, even her mother the queen, parka clad. Little and happy-faced, and for each picture she put in his hand she quietly and honestly said, "Yes, she died of TB in the winter of 19. . . . My pretty sister Frances was nice. She treated me like I had good sense."

Wearing his checkered flannel robe, she came into the living room where he was pacing. The robe's folds carried the line of her body into a striking composition so perfectly female, so powerful, that he leaped spontaneously to her and jerked the robe apart in a mad, awkward gesture. So suddenly had he acted that she, who was still half asleep, drew herself up in quick anger, but as he stepped back a step to swallow the brown, naked form now only half swathed in flannel folds, she understood his need and desire, and stood calm and tall, slowly, drowsily drawing her right hand down the swirl of black hair, lingering across her tawny shoulder and jutting breast and diagonally down across the warm body he had pulsed within all the sleeping morning, clear across to the hip. And he ground his teeth, came close to her again, pushing her down on the divan and laced into her again with an insane passion, a frenzy she well loved and encouraged and lifted out of him with every feminine manner she knew, and she knew them all. In peace of spentness, he lay with her as she kissed the inside of his ear. He felt tears running from his eyes. And suddenly he pulled away from her, not in anger but in desperation. He had seen himself as a bird netted and weakening against the artful meshes of the bird-catcher woman.

"Nomi, you crazy sonofabitch, I can't take it."

"Don't, then," she said indifferently, drawing the robe closed again and knotting the sash.

"Nomi, what are we going to do?" he asked.

"What is there?" she asked, knowing much more clearly than he would ever know.

"All right," he grasped at reality. "Breakfast first, O.K.?"

Nervously he worried about her. Her sudden coughing spells, the digging pains in her abdomen, her high warmth, her nervous, fluttery fingers.

"Let me cook up some bacon and eggs. Fatten you up a little."

"You'd have me fat as Dorthy-down-in-Hennessy's." She smiled.

"Time you're dressed, I'll have breakfast ready."

"You really cook for me?"

"I'd climb the highest mountain," Jim said. "I'd write the song of songs."

"Child, child, your mind is run away and gone out of you," she mocked, and turning away, managed even then to twist the robe to her hips, nearly driving him wild again.

Nervously trying to cook, he heard the shower running, and in a few minutes she was beside him at the table, clean and fresh, alight, alight.

"How'd you get so scarred up, Nomi?" he asked.

"It ain't hard." She looked away. "When persons are rough."

It seemed she might be censuring him for being too gentle, until she said, "You're not. I like that best about you, Jaimie, you don't have to show off."

"That leg scar?" he asked.

"Oh! Oh!" she giggled sillily. "Me and this dogface was on a motorsickle out riding in the snow!" She lifted a rainbow scale of laughter.

Jim smiled politely. "Then what?"

"Oh, the dumb guy! We had a bottle of vodka, too." She was remembering the dark, snowy, motor-popping night. "What a guy. Damned near broke me leg!"

"How?"

"Oh, we was just aroaring up the road toward Circle, y'know, and we hit a rock and bingo, over we went, ass over teakittle, into a snow bank!" She laughed. "And there we were, both of us knocked out, laying in a snow bank, me leg damned near broke and bleeding, and the first thing I know, this dumb guy was tryin' to get into me pants! Love in a snow bank! Oh, me leg!"

"So what then?" Jim smiled.

"Oh, I couldn't," she said, "I hurt so bad. And not just me leg. I had me other miseries, too—and so he got mad. The dumb bunny." She laughed again. "What a guy! So he took off on the bike and I had to limp back to town. What a night that was! I bled all the way. No wonder that goddamned leg is scarred."

"No wonder," Jim said quietly. "What happened to the soldier?"

"Oh, he's still around somewhere," she said, shrugging and cleaning her plate. And deeply interlining, casually, "Maybe you're different'n him, Jim."

"No," he said, "I'm not. Not a bit better or worse. It's you that's different."

"Me? I'm just another clothespin on the line," she turned her thoughts out again.

Or maybe it's the other way, he thought, she is the line with an infinite number of clothespins biting on her.

"Would you like to visit some people?" she asked.

"We got to get me a job today, too."

"They're just people," she said. "My people."

"Any time you're ready."

He let her make the pace, a slow, lazy stride like a Sunday stroll through the park. A passing shower had freshened the flowers, and walks were wet and clean and the air was savory sharp elegance that quickened his heart. He felt her take his hand and in a dream they were surrounded by graciously clean, bursting shrubbery, alone, all alone in sweet air and majestic vegetation, a boy and a girl. Such an exquisite tranquillity he had never experienced, and anywhere, anytime else, he would not have dared, but now he could not resist crossing through the barrier into the ineffable lure of a moment in his life when he was not harassed, not confused, not covering up.

Boy and girl walking hand in hand in bursting springtime green in utter trust and bliss. What treasure she gave him, visions to haunt him, unspendable memories and sweet bread for eternal sustenance, walking on the green grass, walking side by side, walking with a pretty girl, she shall be my bride. . . . And the magic she loosed, the spell she wove, was hers alone to loose and weave. She might have wasted it on another, or she might have as easily withheld it, but sharing hands they walked as a boy and a girl in green glory side by side in the middle of an innocence no one knows.

As they walked slowly through the streets, she indicated the way into a small neighborhood of lichened log cabins surrounded by picket fences and enclosing huge old fir trees, so that he knew this neighborhood was as old as the town itself, and that perhaps the cabin they were approaching was the first cabin ever built here. It was possible they were entering the primal nucleus of Fairbanks itself: a log cabin about twelve by twenty-four with the inevitable double entry and the privy and cache stuck on the back.

"These be friends to me," she murmured.

And he wondered: What assorted characters could she call friends? Six dogfaces coexisting? Six little balls-of-fat klooches assisting? A mixture of both?

But the door was opened by a red-cheeked, toothless and bent old man who peered over his steel-rimmed spectacles at Nomi before recognizing her.

Jim was struck by his curious resemblance to the cobbler.

"Hello." She spoke politely. "This is my friend. Jim, meet K——. Nobody can pronounce his crazy name."

The old man grabbed Jim's hand and shook it firmly. It was an old blue-backed hand, but its grip was strong. A hand Jim liked, even as he stared at the paraphrase of the cobbler's features.

"Come in, come in," Mr. K—— urged, his voice like golden gravel rocking down a Long Tom. "Do come in, Nomi and Jim."

In the front was the living room and kitchen, in the back would be a sleeping room. The walls were painted glistening white, and trails worn from years of traffic were eroded from the once rough planks of the spotless floor.

And in the room, together with a sparse amount of furniture, were a woman and a little girl.

The woman, Mary, was a middle-aged, heavily built Eskimo. A clean, strong face bearing a smile of certitude and security, and her four-year-old daughter, or granddaughter, a lovely, slim, dark-haired child. Could she have been Nomi's? Eskimo parenthood was random, and names were unimportant compared to the joy of having a child about.

As the old man pushed a chair out for him, Nomi said, "We're just taking a walk after the rain." To her walking wasn't a prerogative of rich old ladies in tweed.

"You walk well together." The old man looked at them closely. He was old, but his eyes were sharp and merry behind his glasses.

"Isn't it fine?" The old man turned to his woman. "They're so in love."

Jim was shocked. He was nearly thirty, he was coarse-grained, hairy-backed, birdlegged, and yet the old man was absolutely right.

Because it *was* love in that fresh rain-washed day of sharp blues and greens.

"I like your house," Jim said. "Looks solid as a rock."

"It's very old," K—— said.

"Can you talk to my Suzy?" the little girl asked Nomi.

"Sure I can," Nomi said, leaning over the doll. "Suzy, you're a darlin' doll to scrub the hall."

Gracie laughed, "Oh my, but she didn't."

"Would you like to entertain us?" K—— asked, rosy happiness rimming his weatherbeaten, freshly shaved cheeks.

"Let's sing a song," Gracie said.

"Up on your throne."

Mary smiled proudly as Gracie climbed up on the chair. Tommy fetched out a mouth organ. Jim waited in anticipation. What would this da Vinci child, the image of Nomi, sing?

The old man phrased the song on the mouth organ, the tiny girl, standing on her chair in a pose of saddest rapture, began to sing:

There's a rose that grows in No Man's Land
And it's wonderful to see. . . .

One of a score of World War I ballads the old vet had brought back.

She clasped her hands as the old man had taught her, and raised her eyes to heaven, singing by rote as sweetly as a lonely dawn bird the antique songs he had taught her, and Jim smiled along with the oldtimer who was bright with pride.

He drinks, Jim knew suddenly. Of course.

When the songs were over and little Gracie had acknowledged the applause, the older woman said quietly, but with a certain force, "Someone like to dance?"

"Oh yes." The child climbed down off the chair. "Let's dance."

"I'll sing, you dance," Mary spoke with a combination of authority and respect.

The older woman patted her hands together and Jim's ear caught the measurement of the beat, and the peculiar emphasis and weight of each one. Attending the rhythm, the little girl, who for some reason had put on a pair of feather-edged mittens, began a native dance as unfamiliar and useless to her as the "Rose in No Man's Land."

Mary began a soft, monosyllabic singing accompaniment to the patting of her hands and the beat of her foot: a song of the Eskimo, stern, rigid, exciting, unquestioning, utterly right. It was a song about a man facing his destiny. That is all Jim ever understood, but to the little girl it meant nothing.

A chant, a patting of hands, a tapping of feet as the old man joined in. He knew the beat. He had lived over fifty years with it, he was a part of it. And in the process, Jim thought, God knows how many klooches he sent down the line to be ordinary bust-ass whores. But he was an old member of the family now, content, useful, pleased, and he would die soon: a kloochman.

A chant, a steady patting of hands, a beat of foot, the little girl making wooden, stylized, gloved gestures of long-dead dancers, movements which could as well have been Polynesian.

O where would it end? Jim couldn't stand for these beautiful people to be sold out so cheaply. To kill a person by his own foolish honor is one thing, but to kill a person by his own simple joy is a sin.

"How do your shoes feel now?" the old man asked, nodding at Jim's tapping foot.

"Fine, fine," Jim said, unthinking.

Then it came to him that this red-cheeked, scrubbed and scoured old gentleman actually was the cobbler, fresh shaven, with spectacles and without false teeth, who had exploded his whole summer—if not his whole life.

"Is this your family?" Jim asked quietly.

The old man didn't answer. He clamped his empty gums together and with an air of infinite grief turned away to look out the window.

"It's a beautiful day out," Jim said apologetically.

"I was on the first boat out of Seattle," the old man said. "I came from a large family. Seven brothers and seven sisters. In young manhood I took a wife before God's minister, and we had a child started soon after, but I wasn't much good at a trade and I'd heard there was a fortune to be made here in a summer. Now I have grandchildren older than this sweet tot," the old man murmured, "and I never saw my son, let alone his children."

"That's why I came," Jim said. "I needed some fast money."

"You'll get the money." The old man grinned like a red rose. His trembling hands were spotted blue and brown. "And you can get a native girl and a little shack, and let the rest of the world go by. Boy you'll sure have some times!"

"No, I just need to get a job."

Nomi and Mary were clapping their hands softly together and crooning a chant: *ee hi yah, ee hi yah,* divided by a burst of bubbling vowels.

"Did you ever hear the loon cry?" The old man nodded, watching the little one dance.

"No," Jim said. "In California there aren't any loons that I know of."

"You should hear the cry of the loon. It's an ugly, solitary scream," the old man said firmly, delicately, his voice rumbling back in his throat. "You had better get out to the lakes and the hills."

Jim held his ground. "I guess the big money's here at the airbase. Lots of overtime."

"I can get you work in the country." The old man looked Jim directly in the eyes. "Good money. But of course, you won't ever like where you are after that. No matter where else you go, you will not be entirely sure of where you ought to be."

"Right now I'd take any kind of a job."

"Can you trust Nomi to be here when you get back?" The old eyes assumed a crafty squint.

"She's wonderful," Jim said. "But she needs taking care of."

"Yes," the old man nodded. "Yes."

Jim knew what the old man meant. Nomi would be taken care of by the chumming bartenders, the payday soldiers, the drunk construction bums en masse.

"Could you watch out for her?" Jim asked helplessly.

"Me. Follow this child no one loves? No one."

"Me," Jim said.

"Oh, yes, of course," the old man said disdainfully. "You. But you want the money, big money, easy money. Oh, I know, I know."

"I have no choice," Jim said. "Without money I can't stay in town anyway."

"Money's the boss," the cobbler said, and added, "She's an Anyuk girl, isn't she?"

"Yes," Jim said. "She should go back there. It would be best for her."

"But," the old man's eyes squinted up like an oriental's, "she isn't interested in her best. Who was that in the Bible? What was her name who gave her virtue over and over again for her people's victory?"

"Naomi," Jim said.

"She's yours," the old man spoke with High Lama calm. "I've seen it happen time after time. They're like a fatal itch in the blood, you can't scratch it or cure it. I have seen it happen over and over again."

"Not me." Jim tried to smile. "Not me."

The old man continued, ignoring Jim's lightness and the distant chant of the women. "It's justice. No one asked you to come north, no one asked you to hang around the low-class section of town, no one made you lead Nomi to your home, to your bed. Your wound is self-inflicted. You can't lay it off on God, or society, or any alibi for cowardice. No, she is yours, you are hers. Remember? I remarked upon it when you came in the door."

"You did," Jim said firmly. "But you kept my shoe, and I might have sent in the loyalty oath and at the very least, I'd have gotten the plane north. It's really your fault."

"Ah—" the cobbler raised an admonishing forefinger and smiled cheerily—"but I am too old to be held accountable. Next time apply to a younger cobbler for your small jobs."

"But you did it."

"What difference! What difference at all? Can Typhoid Mary cure typhoid? You are in the sty of Circe, you locked the gate on yourself."

"I can kick any habit," Jim replied.

"Why bother?"

"I still have a family to support," Jim said, not laughing.

"Every man has a family to support." The cobbler nodded agreeably. "Did you know that the best Eskimo hunter can have several wives, and in fact, measure his success by the number of wives he can keep busy chewing on his mukluks?"

"My shoes are O.K. now," Jim said.

Mary, old enough to be Nomi's mother, a strong, battered, dark-faced serenity, patting her hands and intoning the *ee hi yah* chant with tranquillity, teaching the ancient rhythm to her daughter, or her granddaughter what difference, teaching ritual heritage to a young child who might indeed teach it again sixty years hence, or then again, might die as a fingerling in a cold, tubercular winter— But that was not a problem. There were no problems. There were only things to be done and things to be expressed. Only a few things were to be avoided: heavy-handed authority, in whatever form it came, and greed.

"The work I have in mind is the sort that comes up so quickly they don't have time to get the loyalty oaths out." The cobbler interrupted Jim's thinking. "All they have time to do is write down the name and address of your next of kin."

"Thanks," Jim said with irony. "It must pay well too."

"Oh, yes, and it'll get you out into the woods where you belong."

"What kind of work is it?"

"Not yet," the old man whispered. "They can only hire so many for this job and if word got around, no doubt you'd be at the tail end of a long line. I'll just keep it quiet until I see a smoke signal, so to speak. Keep your shoes in good repair and take good care of Nomi if you can."

The old man looked steadily into Jim's face. He meant exactly what he said.

5

BIRDMAN

No, SHE didn't want lunch. No, she wouldn't eat. Couldn't eat. She had starving mink gnawing in her stomach. She shouldn't have tasted breakfast. She needed a couple of drinks to numb the pain.

"If you'd eat something, you'd feel better. You're starved."

"Do I look starved?" she demanded. "Look, Jaimie boy, when I look as bony as you, I'll start worrying."

"Nomi, a bowl of soup—"

"No, Nomi, no bowl of soup. A bowl of beer!"

It was late in the afternoon. They had made the usual promenade of the streets, had greeted the freshfaced friends, had looked in the store windows, had giggled at this and that, but now her seething daylight night was already overdue and while she liked Jim, she didn't like him enough to just change her ways willy-nilly—ways she was used to, ways that made each day a day of raw nerves and extravagant emotions.

How she had loved that bony birdman, O how! Where a woman as raw as she in screaming, quivering love, no, he could not find one anywhere because there were none. There were none because no one lived so close to the edge of the bubbling sun as she, no one exploded like geysers and lava, no one burned with such voluptuous heat, no one did, because no one dared. She dared and be damned. Beyond where she had gone was only death. And as grandly as Don Juan, she accepted death too, as a participant in her molten sex.

So she wouldn't eat. It would dilute the acid in her cells, blunt the fangs of the gnawing mink. Only dogs ate, and Outsiders.

But she'd have a couple of drinks to draw up the loving pennant of pain from the bottom of her feet to the back of her head.

Jim moved along with her. He was tired. He was disturbed. He wanted her to come home with him, spend a quiet evening listening to the radio, playing a game of cards. Have a couple of drinks, a good dinner, and eight hours sleep. But no matter how he cajoled or commanded, he got nothing from her but a disbelieving smile, a vague look in her enormous eyes, and the absolute knowledge that she was three steps ahead of him no matter how he decided to go.

He hung on anyway. He might have lost wit, laughter, humor, but not his stubbornness.

He was on the spit of love, roasting in his hell, or Nomi's hell—if there was a difference he couldn't think what it was. He was madly in love with this simple girl, and he was madly possessive, but one might as well try to possess a forest fire in an August tornado. No one's arms could spread so wide, no one's tears could rain so much, no one's mind so perversely quick to outguess the fornicating flames.

O Christ, Nomi, forget it then. Don't eat. One drink. Just one. Yes, yes, goddamn you, I know you got the money. Just given to you. Twenty dollars here, twenty dollars there, I know, you goddamned smoldering barrel of high-test love. I know how you got the money. One drink—

They had the drink in the Pedro Bar.

"That's better," she breathed sharply, "much better. Honey punkin pie," she explained to Jim, "it's just money."

"I know," he said. "It's you spelled assbackwards."

"Oh you birdlegs," she giggled, "I can keep you in money till old Mr. K—— gets you work."

"You cannot, because I wouldn't take a dime of it. Christ, Nomi, don't bring me money." He looked deep into her sweet brown eyes, so lovely, lovely as her face and her body, and so cryptic. "Christ, Nomi, bring me grayling and salmon, bring me mukluks and oogruk, bring me blueberries in baskets. . . ."

She leaned over and slowly kissed him in the hollow angle of his collar bone. He was ready to leap on her right then. She saw the wildness in his eyes and laughed at him.

"I've got the best thing with me."

"Come on."

It was only three blocks to Noel Street but they took a cab. Jim hoped to hell Joe and Kitty were out somewhere. He was himself a jet, a rocket, a blazing, shooting star which had no mind and no intent except to explode in the heavens.

He blazed at her on the bed and she returned oil and musk to his awful burning ascension, and at last when he was still, and when he slept, she kissed him sweetly and tenderly in the bony hip joint where her own sweat was still moist, dressed, and disappeared in the night which still was not dark.

She had a few dollars in her pocket. And she had a great thirst. She was late for the party. There was a shortage of time, of fun, a shortage of summer season already whipping by.

In the first bar, the smoke was refreshing, the din marvelous, the hustling bartender a panic, and she bought a couple of drinks to level off the day and get the evening started. Looking up through the smoke she saw the familiar face of a G.I. He was pinkfaced. He had little eyes, a crooked smile.

"Hi, Nomi," he said, "I been looking for you."

"What for?" she giggled. "Dance?"

"Sure. Dance, drink, diddle," he laughed suggestively, and she returned his leer. He might as well have looked in a mirror and started masturbating.

"Buy a drink?" she asked.

He opened his wallet and laid out a twenty-dollar bill. "Sure. Buy us a drink," he said.

She tossed off the new drink, and he shoved the change at her. It would make a grubstake for the night.

"Come on," he said, "let's take a ride. I got my car outside."

They drove a mile from town where he lasted a minute and a half. He drove her back to Second Avenue, being big and bluff, having conquered again; not having the slightest idea of how much he had lost, how he had been irrevocably and totally annihilated, been raped and dishonored, been deballed and enslaved and thrown into the pen of swine where she kept his kind.

She went on into another bar. Now she was in less of a hurry than ever, now she was swinging on the vodka, now the fires were blue azure, now the smoke was liquid and dark and violet, now the living was on top of the wheel that was turning ever so slowly upward or downward whichever way you happened to see it.

Sometime before midnight she had taken another ride with an unwashed construction bum who could hurt with his teeth but she gave him all he wanted, leaving him exhausted, taking the large gift of money he offered; he knowing, having been north a long time, that she was really the only woman he'd ever banged who could take all he had and ask for more. It was a bargain, and to hell with the money, to hell with the wife and family in Seattle.

She was already in an echoing haze of vodka wherein everyone was her friend, everyone was in love, everyone was a sharer. And as midnight passed along, she wandered the circle of bars, staying longest in the noisiest, making a good try to get the men with money to buy a lot of drinks for the house to help out the nice bartenders, and she heard through the terrible blue steel heat cloud, Jim's dry, hoarse voice.

"C'mon, Nomi, you got a skinfull, let's go home."

"Hi, Jaimie, honey punkin' doll. Oh, you sweetie, where you been, huh? You let Nomi loose into the damndest night I ever seen. Ain't it just a rockin' and roarin'! Whooee, what a wicked night! Say, Jim, have a drink. C'mon. Light up a smoke and drink a man's drink, uh!"

Now she was challenging him but he was not only crazy mad in love with this lionhusky bitch, he was also getting an inkling of the mirror she held up for ordinary mankind.

"I've got a beer," he said, looking over her head.

"Oo," she howled. "Oo, you little parse-arsed bastard, you are the craziest."

"C'mon, Nomi, beddy-bye."

"After while, honey," she said so automatically that he knew that she had heard it a hundred times before and was bored stiff with it.

"Well, O.K. What the hell can I do then?"

"Say, Jim," she said, "This is Ned. He's a friend of mine, you might say. Hey, Ned?"

"Can you buy a drink for us, Nomi?" the Ned bum asked.

"Sure, baby. Ernie, you long-assed bastard, buy old Nookie Ned a drink, will ye, and bring one here for old scratchy balls, too!"

She wailed in merriment as the two men looked awkwardly at each other. Ned downed his drink. Jim didn't like competing with this fat, red-lipped and three-day-whiskered cadger. He despised his rival, he despised Nomi, he despised himself. He started to leave, but he was tied with klooch cable. He laughed when he was supposed to laugh, and he glared at Ned whenever he could.

Ned said, "You known her long?"

"No, not long," Jim said unwillingly.

"For my money she's the best piece of ass in the Territory!" Ned said confidentially.

"You been up here long?"

"Too long. I shoulda gone back. I was goin' to get on the G.I. Bill, but I come up here and couldn't never leave. Couple of times I got a good stake, but always pissed it away, y'know. I even got as far as the airport once."

"Yeah," Jim nodded. "What do you do now?"

Ned shook his head. "Work is slow, but I'll get on a job at Ladd before long, or the pipeline out at Twenty Mile. They say there's big money in that."

"Yeah," Jim said. "You got a trade?"

"No, but I got a half a dozen union cards. What do you do?" he asked politely, still hoping.

"I dunno," Jim said, "I just don't know. I just got here."

"Better hurry, boy, there's one hell of a long winter."

Just then Jim noticed through the haze and bedlam that she was gone.

"Where is she?" He knew already he'd been tricked, "where did she go?"

"Never mind," Ned smiled. "Don't try to keep up with 'em. Best wait till later when they're already drunk, then it don't cost nothin'!"

Jim went outside, suffused with waves of anger. Why bother with the halfbreed bitch? Hadn't he given his best and she still was on the loose, a tramp, a lousy cunt, a lush-head? Sure, O.K., so quit while you're ahead, and try to forget the unforgettable.

Besides, there was no finding her. She would be arching up and planting her feet on the ceiling of a car by now, and where she would land, no one would ever be able to guess because she wouldn't know herself. Stupid bum of a bitch-dog bastard! He felt like weeping.

He gangled slump-shouldered down the street, knowing a few faces that he'd met along the way. There was Don, and Fred out looking for a free piece, and there was an Indian wino collecting a pint of wine a penny at a time from the traffic, like a fish breathing the flowing stream. And there, by God, for a moment was the rosy-faced, dark-eyed cobbler easing down an alleyway.

In the hotel lobbies were a few construction men who were either too poor or too uninterested to play the klooch game. They sat and watched television reruns on deathly pale screens, and they looked neither right nor left until one day surely they would be looking straight ahead at that cold door of blue light and suddenly plop right out of sight, down a tunnel that never ended.

Out of the rooming-house district, he squished along the wet sidewalk. Daylight still held on, though God knows it was late. He passed a vacant lot where this morning small cabbage plants were starting and now tonight they were balled bursting leaves.

At 400 Noel he paused a moment at the door to look up and down the avenue. There was no movement. The street was light, but empty. The people were in their houses asleep as they were supposed to be at this hour of night.

With a sense of an aching, bowel-breaking tragedy, he climbed the two steps.

Joe was still up. He looked up from his paperback sexbook and nodded dully. "Get a job?" he asked.

The question threw Jim back into another box of new color and dimension. He had to think suddenly of where he was and what actually had happened or what he had positively done that day toward making a livable future. He thought he'd only lived the day, had lived every minute as it ticked by, and had not lived a pennysworth in the future, had not laid up an ear of corn, a page of insurance, had done nothing except sense, and react to the sense. Exactly as Nomi lived her entire life.

"Let's see." It was difficult to answer, because Joe looked so worried. "Yes, I met a guy who said he'd give me a call. Said I could really make a bundle, but I'd have to go out into the boondocks—"

"What kind of work?" Joe asked. He was already figuring if he could rent Jim's bed by the week.

"Oh, I dunno," Jim said. "Digging or something."

Joe perked up at that. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, well, he didn't say. But it's in the bag."

"What's in the bag?" Joe asked more than doubtfully. "What the hell are you talking about? Who was this guy? Really?"

"A guy. You know, the cobbler that's been bugging me all along."

"Now look, Jimbo," Joe said, "that old cobbler's a local nut. Nobody's sure who he is or where he came from, but he flipped in 1904. Everybody knows that. He's just filling you full of the usual baloney. What else did you get?"

"Get?" Jim asked.

"Goddamn it, yes, get! Don't be so damned holy. You've got to look out for old Number One, just like everybody else."

"Well, that's your story, dad, and you're stuck with it," said Jim. "I saw Don and Fred downtown," he added, hoping that would start a new trend of thought.

"Yeah, what a jerk. He's trying to buck the union brass again. Steer clear of him."

"How? What?"

"Oh, he's always been a friend to me, but he's going to louse up everyone if he doesn't stop rockin' the boat."

"What's he doing?"

"He's trying to run for president of the local strongbacks, but Arblick picks his own presidents. Sure, John's been stealing them blind, and conning everyone except Don and a few of his friends, but he's the power behind the throne. And sure he's a shit, but he's also the string-puller, and Don ain't on any string."

"Election?"

"Sure, there's supposed to be an election next week, but that cat is on top. You watch. Don, or anyone who even looks like he's ever known Don, won't be allowed a day's work all summer and, brother, that'll kill 'em and they damned well know it. So keep clear of him. I'm in a different union, but they all gang up, you know, and boy, I wouldn't be seen with Don's bunch now."

"But is he a real crook, this Arblick?"

"Sure he is! Everybody is! Everyone looks out for old Number One," Joe declared. "A few years ago Arblick was a strongback, a jerk, a bullshitter, but nothing. Then he got Don and some other starry-eyed dopes to help him take over the union. Then all of a sudden he has bought a saloon next door to the union hall, and everybody knows he used the union money to do it, and all of a sudden he's going to Seattle on 'union' business, and bringing back about four whores at a time for more saloons. Then he put in a scab herder named Dog Kelley as president and went on from there. Now if you're on his side, you go to his bars and buy his booze, laugh at his jokes, and fuck his whores, and once in a while you get a free one, y'know? The mutual back-scratching society. That's smart business."

"Jesus Christ, they'll ruin old Don."

"Sure they will, but he's asking for it. He could play along and get fat because he's got the headhunters' votes. But there ain't enough jigs to swing it. He's beat before he starts. Steer clear of him, that's all I'm sayin'."

"I'm not in the union anyway."

"Tomorrow you better check on some of the stores, see if they need clerks." As an afterthought, he added, "I wonder where Kitty is?"

"Working?"

"She works a late shift at the officers' club, but she ought to be home by now."

"I'm going to hit the hay."

Jim ambled through the kitchen, picked up a sawdust-flavored cookie from a soiled cellophane pack, and on into his room. He found a tablet and pen, and thinking back quietly now, in repose and thoughtfulness, in the vault of his new history, tried to perfect a composition in his mind which would make the day of his wife three days hence a happy day, one in which she would feel his sense of duty and his honor and his devoted love for her.

DEAR FRIEDA,

Whenever you look out, the sun is shining. It is always light, I guess, though sometimes when I wait to try to catch it dark, I happen to nod off and the dark thief steals in and out again with a few hours of black in his bag. A bedazzled, bedizened, bull-pizzled country.

No work yet, but any day now I'm expecting a call to a job which will bail us out. No question about it, only when.

My hours are still filled with fellowship researching. Perspective of a Population in a Posture of Parturition. New Title— No, really, they're nice, these people, total strangers, but absolute comrades of social generosity. Nowhere else is there this phenomenon except immediately after a disaster.

But the Eskimos of course are extinct already, for all practical purposes, and I don't mean to bend your ear on peccant thoughts. I do want you to know that good old dad is doing his usual best—which God knows is somehow not connected with looking out for old Number One—but nonetheless, the life to be lived, ours, yours, mine and the baby's when he comes, too, will be lived in such a way, I hope, that we can all have regard for Number Two ad infinitum.

O.K., baby, get a move on.

Yours, JIMMY DOOLITTLE

Finishing the letter, he drowsily sealed it, addressed the envelope and laid it aside. As he dozed off he heard Joe going to his own bed. Kitty had not come home yet. Problems, problems, he thought tiredly.

Where is she, where is she? O Christ, what is she doing? Who has her drunk and down, who has her. . . .

He slept with fearful anguish as the dark crept in.

He stirred as she too drifted wavering through his door, slumped on the bed, belched, hiccupped, giggled quietly, stripped in seconds. Christ our Lord, how many times has she peeled tonight, he thought sadly.

She lay liquid alongside him, the fumes of alcohol drifted off her breath, and off the drinks she had spilled over her skin, and the sour vomit taste crowded into his nose, and the bland, buckeye bloom of wasted sperm, and the natural sweat of her and how many more, and a scent of venous blood, and the sound of her coughing against a sucking school of lung squid. She snored. She coughed. She farted. She shrieked in pain and fear. He lay beside her, awake. She cried out in her alcoholic nightmare, and he drifted his arm over to protect her from the wolves in her dreams as she twitched and snarled, beating back the enemies that would consume her. And in between she hacked the lung cough.

The faint light coming through the window outlined the harsh breathing shadow which had come to him like a ghost needing his shelter, like a soul deserted between heaven and hell, needing an arm from someone no matter how stringy and gaunt. Any arm would do since there were none else, only perhaps his if he had the inclination and the daring.

She groaned in her sleep. She screamed at odd times; she jerked and fought in her dreams. Whatever would she tell an analyst? A wolf, a dog, a bear, a seal, a whale, a man chased her? No, strangely, it was only an owl. *Nahtah.*

So he held her loosely and tried to ward away the beak and claws that struck at her liver, that raped her crotch and mouth, that ripped at her flanks and buttocks, that trampled on her breasts and face, that ate at her insides with an acid the color of vodka.

In time she quieted, relaxing as a remembrance of berrypicking childhood warmed her dream. He still shielded her as best he could with his arm, alert against the dark gods of daylight he knew were her deadly foes: the bartenders' toothy grins, the Arab slaver and blackbirder disguised as the president of the Kiwanis or the Boy Scout master, the silver skipping dollars like bullets fired back and forth.

So he secured her to him, and he had to say to himself he was a free man, he could choose his deeds, he could drive his own chariot to hell or heaven, no matter, no matter, musha musha he would stick.

He realized the despair he'd felt at losing her that night and that no matter how he despised her, he had to love her because she was what he was not. Had she only stayed with him, what then? She would have been only mortal, he decided, and she was not mortal. That was certain. No one who released the agony of passion she suffered could be only mortal. She was the active and the passive, Yang and Yin, unbounded by Arctic Circle.

"Oh hell." She held her eyes shut in the late morning. "Me feet—"

He awakened. He hadn't known he'd slept. What a pleasurable sleep with an arm around a naked wife in the night.

But the night was morning. A smell of stale breakfast. Oh my God, breakfast past. Joe and Kitty gone, and what to do? But why? Let them go.

"Oh me damned feet," she groaned.

He felt her turn toward him still asleep, still groaning and bitching about her feet, and her nipple was in his mouth, and she still saying, "Oh, Christ, me feet," even as she was bringing her hips to buck, and swaying a cobra rhythm on the sleep-filled cushion. In dream she loved, in anything anywhere she loved.

And spent from love, he heard her cough once sharply. A pause and twice a bitter, acrid cough, and still more, too many to count, until a bulb of blood lined out slowly from the downward side of her still sleeping mouth, which burst like a bell every time her lung hacked another breath.

The morning's waking to life was a quick pity. She came through but with a vodka-aching head and a pain all through her.

"Oh leave me alone, damn you," she said as Jim tried to get her to take a bath.

It was late. The house empty. Everyone gone to work. Joe had railed loud with Kitty for coming in so late, but she'd persisted that she'd only worked overtime for extra money. Their row had come through the paper walls to Jim, who had enough to bear without leaning over for more.

Jim sat in the corner of the bedroom sketching Nomi nude. A perfect model, she seldom moved except in the throes of a cough. She lay on her side, her mothering hip swelled up high, her shoulder turned to a skew-angled plane, her breasts just tipping against the sheet, her blue jet mane curving over a shoulder and breast.

Jim's quick line sketches were firm, clear and expressive, even though his mind was nothing but foggy confusion, and his emotions were seared as if a caustic were brewing in his belly.

"I'm sick, Jim," she said quietly. "I hurt all over. I'm sorry."

"Into the bathroom," he urged. "I've got the tub ready. Get it while it's hot."

With a stubborn thrust of her jaw, she climbed to her feet and limped into the bathroom. "Oh, goddamn, somebody stomped me feet." She eased herself into the half-filled tub and was silent as the warm water eased off the jagged points of the pain. "Honest to God, Jim, you must think I'm crazy," she said, looking miserably into the water.

"Honest to God," he said. "Why'd you leave me last night?"

"I dunno," she said. "There isn't no why at all to it."

Jim kneeled by the tub and lifted her foot carefully from the water. The bruised, wretched foot, full of lumps and displaced joints, like a bag of marbles. Her thin mocs were no protection against a G.I. boot. He took a cloth and soap, and gently washed at the ground-in grime.

"That feels better," she said, leaning back, yielding to the warm water's draw. "I guess I'm not going to make it, though."

"Aspirin help?"

"No, it's not the hangover hurting at me, it's me insides. Oh, well, damn."

"Where does it hurt inside?" he asked, starting to wash the other foot.

"Me chest, me stomach, me womb. All knots and lumps, all knives and pins."

"I could build you up before fall," he said. "You'd have to change your ways, though."

"I like me ways."

"You just said it yourself: if you keep going this road you're not going to make it to winter."

"Oh, shut up! I don't like people talking about me dying. When I die, it'll be my way," and looking up proudly, she declared, "I've lived *anyway*."

"There's more to living than being a lush," he said.

"What? Family? Kids? Houses?"

"Sure. You'd make a great wife for somebody."

"I been married, Jaimie boy," she said, her depression ended.

She soaped her breasts and throat.

"When I was thirteen, remember? I had a baby boy when I was fourteen. Oh, say," she grinned, remembering, "that was a party. It was up at Tanana. Me husband was working a bulldozer. So we went down to the bar and I was feeling no pain, boy, when they pulled that kid out of me. What a party! Dancing, singing, raising hell, boy, that's the way to have a kid. I never felt a thing."

"Where is the boy? What happened to him?"

"Bobbie? Oh, I see 'im once in a while. John took him when he run off and got a white woman. That's how he made the bigtime. She had a bar, but she cut him in on it when they got married."

"Were you divorced?"

"Well, we never exactly went before a preacher, y'know, so we don't need a lawyer neither," she said. "My son, Bobbie, though, he'll be a big shot some day, he won't be pushed around like these dumb natives."

Jim silently reflected that young Bobbie was going to be pushed around aplenty if his eyes were slanted and his skin was dark. He eased her foot back into the tub.

"Guess I'm goin' to live," she giggled. "Now get out of here. It ain't decent for you to be givin' me no bath."

In a few minutes she drifted into the kitchen after him, straight and tall, her long hair shining.

"You better get rid of me," she said.

"I never washed a woman's foot before."

"You're funny."

"I'm nuts, and I'm taking you down to the clinic today."

"Hey now," she said. "You're getting to be a real old mama bear, ain'tcha? I been in that clinic a few times already—"

"Just a check-up."

"Smells good." She evaded the dictum, as he set a plate before her. "You'll make somebody a very nice wife." She giggled wildly.

"All the same, say, I mean, just suppose, you had TB, you'd ought to be doing something about it. They got drugs now that'll knock TB right off."

"Their drugs didn't do anything for my big sister," Nomi said.

"Or," he continued stubbornly, "say you got a cyst or a tumor or somethin' inside you somewhere, they got to take it out before it grows too big."

"I know I ain't havin' no government doctors sticking their damned probes and tubes and wires into me no more. They hurt me near to death. No more. Last winter, even against my will, they stuck their damned awful things up me so I hurt for a month."

"Against your will?"

"Sure. I was in jail, and they don't give you a chance once they got you in there."

"How long?"

"Too long," she said grimly, hatefully, as she remembered the cell she'd shared. Dull, dull, dull. "I been in and out of every kind of scrape you can make, boy, and I don't need the clinic to be cuttin' my insides out either."

"Nomi, will you just do it for me?" he asked. "No cutting or anything—just an examination."

"Wait'll I get dressed," she said, hacking into a napkin. "I'm feelin' a lot better."

"I don't want to preach."

"Well, don't preach then. Just shut up."

"Look, birdbrain," he said, "I am not asking for thanks, but I don't want a lot of crap either, so lay off."

"Birdbrain—" she reflected. "Once I went to the mission school—goddamned nuns—their tongues would hang out when they got to switch a little native girl. I used to climb over the wall all the time. I'd meet the kids outside and, oh, we would play games and figure out tricks to play on the nuns and get ours back, you know. I found a dead dog one night and I cut off its cock and sneaked back and put it on old Baldy's desk. Boy, in the morning was she ever mad! And when she was yelling at everybody and giving us hell for being dumb natives, I just sat there and watched her, cool as a blueberry, and smiled just as sweet. I bet she took it to bed with her. Once, when I was twelve, they switched my bare ass till it bled, right in front of everybody, and I went over the wall and went downtown, got drunk, got a soldier and never went back."

"Parents?"

"Dead and gone. I told you."

"Yes, I guess you did." He felt like crying. "Goddamn, you tell me the saddest damned stories I ever heard."

"You want to hear another?" she said. "I took their tests one time and I graded out with an I.Q. of better'n a hundred forty."

She looked at him levelly, distantly, smiling slightly, cool as a blueberry, and he would never know whether she was simply putting a dog's cock in front of him or simply telling the ordinary truth. He felt robbed and insulted. Surely, yes, she was as intelligent as any person he'd ever met, but her deliberate abortion of that intelligence was the highest crime in his code of ethics, for he still believed that intelligence was the prime value of life, and she surmised this in him, and flaunted it, spit on it, and gave hers away to thieving bartenders. O how she hated! But hate wasn't it. . . . Baudelaire said it, *"When I have inspired universal horror and disgust, I shall have conquered solitude."*

He was smiling as sweetly at her as she at him, and they fought their duel with perfect composure. In fact, as she finished breakfast and had a cigarette (making him light it in his mouth first because she liked to flaunt his smoking ban, and liked to tempt him with everything she had), she offered him a truce, because she loved him and she knew he loved her, and knew too there was nothing to be had for them except the splendid fire they made together.

She let the robe slip aside and his eyes caught her, his nose caught her, his manhood caught her, however in whatever metastasis these things are done, and with an angry growl he jumped at her and bit her lips and eyelids as she stroked the back of his neck, and he bore her as a beast to the floor and split her wide open.

He hated himself as he flew and crashed and died. He only wanted to get her to the clinic first, and then to plan a place for her in a civilized home or school, or something, and already he was wrapped up in her long legs and she was kissing his tears from his eyes.

"I'm sorry, sorry, Nomi."

"Be still, love," she said. "Be still, be happy, be something."

How happy? How anything? If he had fallen in love with a horse, or a dog, he could have managed, but this beast was not docile, was not ever bought no matter how much was paid.

"Nomi, what am I going to do with you?"

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing. Just be still."

"I hate debts," he said. "I don't want to owe anything to you, or anyone."

"You can't owe me anything. You can't pay for what I have. I don't give a damn. I am proud of myself."

"Nomi," he muttered, "if I had ever dreamed even in my worst nightmares that I would be lectured on abstract French philosophy while coupled on the kitchen linoleum, I would have cut my wrists right then."

"French!" she giggled, then, in that instant, he knew the giggle was her retreat, her armor and sword.

She pulled away from him, squatting crosslegged on the floor.

"For a college graduate, you are funny!"

"Nomi, Miss I.Q., you are the cleverest too, and you don't fool me at all, at all, at all." And even as he spoke, she rolled easily and loosely over onto his lap, her tongue in his ear, her breath whistling down the marrow of his bones, her hands inside his legs and he was rolling again down the granite-clawed velvet canyon into the supreme abyss and after a while he simply stretched out on the floor and groaned like a wounded beast . . . Oooooooo.

And she giggled faintly like a trembling leaf— O my soul! O my soul!

He felt her mouth on his nipples and working along, licking her tongue across his chest, her fingers weaving mystic signs on his backbone and she was burying her face in the pocket of his stomach and bang, off he was again on that loopity looping toboggan, his brain so utterly cremated, it twinkled only like jewels reflecting the fires of hell and off he went again. And this time he lay silently, crying softly to himself. He himself brought anguish against himself; she had torn and devoured every screen he had ever built within his core.

After an eternity of gentle, most patient persuasion, he convinced her that she should go to the free clinic of the Great White Father. And to make sure she didn't get waylaid on Second Avenue, he strolled along with her.

Several times she wanted to stop for just one drink but he stubbornly held her to her word. Once she'd gone through the clinic she could do whatever she wanted. He thought he was being very firm and honest, dominating and benevolent.

They came to Cushman and Jim was almost amazed at her pleasant docility. He had expected a battle. They turned down Cushman, which was empty of bars, and passed by the small curio shops, the shops of furriers whose windows were artistically hung with factory-made parkas, the furs glossy in their freshness. Nomi looked at them with a critical eye.

"In the winter," she said, "those things come in handy."

"Did you ever sew furs?" Jim asked, trying to keep her mind off the doctor's office.

"Sure, I can catch martin, skin him, tan him and sew him—bite sinew, chew mukluks, but no more. Too much work. I can skin a seal through his mouth, so he ends up just like a bag. I sewed mukluks till my hands were raw and my teeth hurt so much I had to use pliers instead. Nobody cared. But you go blind doing that work, and you get hardly a dab of money for it."

They turned left again and came to the concrete-walled government clinic dedicated to keeping the natives healthy.

All they had to do was get the natives to come in. All they had to do was lock the native up and throw away the key.

"Jesus Christ, Jim," she said, worried and nervous. "Honey, it's rough in there. People giving orders. Nurses being big shots. All frowning and mean. They don't get enough lovin', you know. And the doctors, they don't feel it when they stick their instruments up inside somebody else."

"All you need is a TB test. That's easy. I'll go on in with you."

"No, no," she said firmly. "You go on and do something else. It may take a long time. Don't wait."

"I'll wait."

"Don't be crazy. It could take all afternoon."

She bent over and very modestly kissed his cheekbone. "You're nice, Jim, only you expect a lot from a dumb Eskimo girl."

She laughed then, and tossed her heavy sweep of crow-wing hair and strolled with the dignity of a queen into the forbidding building.

He waited on the steps for an hour.

"Nomi?" replied the receptionist in the overwarm, over-lighted, oversized room. "She was in, yes, yes, she asked what time it was."

The nurse was plump, redfaced and unloved.

"And then she went out the side door. . . . Of course, I know her."

Is she very sick? Jim wanted to ask, but whatever good would a question be, or even an answer, if Nomi didn't give a damn.

"Thanks," Jim said. "If she does ever come in, she should get some treatment."

"Treatment?" The nurse scowled. "They always get the best! But what do we get? We get a cussing, that's all."

"Thanks," Jim said again, very humbly. He couldn't understand how he'd gotten into this humility routine. He was no goddamned bearded square hungering for a cross.

—Oh, you miserable thinassed chingazo puta whore bitch, he cursed silently, steadily, as he ambled into the street, knowing she was somewhere on First Avenue, or Second Avenue, or to dodge him was off to the South Side, or perhaps to that little log-cabin bar on Fourth and Lacey. . . . Oh, there were so damned many bars with so many back ways in this damned town, and what difference if he found her, she'd simply wander off again, lost again.

Already the jukeboxes were blaring into the daylight dusk:

I brought you a dozen roses so red
Flowers of love I remember you said. . . .

You could let it go at that, he thought. A stupid song for a stupid people. Why waste the time? Why bother your Calvinistic conscience with the brown whore? But he was in pain.

She was still mystery. He knew her soul was so utterly simple and pure, so utterly unbeguiling, that he could never simply accept it.

Goddamn, instead of ape, I'm going deep Slav. All this foreboding, gloom and shadow. Hells bells, man, get out the old soft-shoe routine: screw that dumb broad. Agree with the majority that she's the best piece of ass in town. That's all. And you got the best of it free for nothing.

You call that ache in your navel nothing. You call it nothing, the vision of her staggering, mocked and sold down the street, my princess, my royal dignitary, thoroughly eroded and stomped to shit.

He tried the Employment Office in the tall, gray Federal building.

The clerks were pretending to be busy while slyly courting each other. At the counter, or at the records files, somehow well-dressed male and female came together, looked at each other sidewise, murmured little phrases. Like prisoners in cells under the eye of Big Brother they made the future of any love by and large doubtful, if it could ever be consummated physically anyway, but at least the helpless gesture was made, the rite carried on to a new generation who might yet figure out how to fuck in a file cabinet.

His sketching eye caught them: they were desiccated or fat or in between. They were not ignorant because they read books at night, and read avant magazines on the toilet, and spoke in favor of organized labor, which they yet refused to consider for themselves since they were above all that. They were charitable liberals. Some were outspoken on one subject or another—Sartre, Sex, Aid to Needy Children.

A nice-looking, skinny, bucktoothed, contact-lensed girl came to greet him at the counter.

"Your name?" she asked politely, reaching for a pen.

"My name's Jim Carondelet and I'm just wondering what kind of a job have you got for me?"

"You need work?" she asked.

"God knows," he said.

"Can you perform?" she asked, her eyes glittering.

And Jim thought, for Christ's sake, what am I? A walking hard-on?

And she was immediately blushing. "I mean, what can you do? That is. . . ."

"What's available," Jim saved her.

If she says "me," I'll kill her with a dull knife, he thought.

She nodded at a blackboard on the wall. In the background he saw a heavy-hipped male in suit and tie brush by a tall, rubber-titted redhead leaning over a desk.

WANTED:
Salesman, brush
Salesman, hosiery
Salesman, book
Salesman, shoes
Salesman, vitamin

"I'll be back," he forced a smile, "if you need a man."

Next stop, the strongbacks' hiring hall.

He entered a dingy little cubicle divided by a counter, waited, and sure enough, a gorgeously stacked, dyed, tinted, painted and powdered and perfumed piece of femininity came out of the back office to meet him. He was stunned. Everywhere he went there was quim of some dimension.

He began to feel something occult, something deliberately inciting to his already inflamed mind. Jesus Christ, she was a hard beauty. The perfect whore.

"Something?" she breathed huskily.

"Yes," he murmured, "something to do."

"You have a card," she breathed again.

"No card," he said, expiring.

"You want a card?" She looked at him, not saying, A little party, honey?

"Yes," he said.

"A hundred and twenty dollars. Initiation fee."

"My god!" he said, "I was initiated into the Sigma Tau for the loot burgled from Professor Tweedie's office—"

"We're an honest union."

"I know, I know," he said desperately, "but that's a big load. Can you take it out of my wages?"

"No," she said.

No sale, he thought. She's straight as a cash register.

"It's awful damned expensive," he said.

"It's worth it," she said looking up at him through long silky blonde lashes. "Really."

It takes more than a 36–24–36 to make it worth it, he decided. Nomi could burn this tiger up in a flash by her own simple hustle heat.

"Can't cut it."

"Well, if you saw the chief. . . ." She still held out a hope to him, reluctant to lose his tall beanpole frame.

"Where's the chief?" he asked.

"Around in the hall," she answered, cupping casually a perfect breast in her hand ready to jet a stream of milk directly into his grim, wracked mouth. "Go see him first."

He rambled on into the hall. Only a small room, almost a dance floor furnished with a few chairs. The entire room had an unused, dusty look about it. The walls were gray cement, and the concrete floor was painted. At one end was a small stage, and on one wall was a tackboard holding several ancient bulletins and mimeographed, unread, government proclamations.

But there was a rising little whirlwind of anger being generated in the middle of the room as several men in blue jeans and brown twill, wearing little leather caps, or bareheaded, some black, some part native, most of them white, stood in a tight strictured knot of mean rage. At the focus of this tangle was the urbane, baby-faced, clever-eyed John Arblick.

If Arblick prevailed it would be no time at all before the strongbacks could organize the entire mass of whores in Alaska and Arblick could be the supreme pimp, the Grand Whoremaster of the International Lady Leg-Spreaders. If anyone could do it, Arblick could. You had only to see the casual way he left his white silk shirt collar open to show his leanings toward the proletariat, his shifting eyes, his Seattle-tailored slacks, his faggoty walk, his cornfed, wavy yellow hair. Oh yes, the Supreme Panderer of Organized Notch. Why not?

But as he came closer, Jim saw that the other principal in this pool of men aboil was Don Hennessey. Don's backers were a few dreary-looking, nearly defeated men. Some were Negroes.

Arblick was waving a mimeographed page. The headlines scratched in the stencil read, "Arblick Hides Records," and the story below stated that the financial records of the union had not been reviewed, audited, or even seen in the past two years. It also added that Arblick had brought in another string of Seattle girls on union funds and installed them in his bar on the South Side. It also reported that an election for president was to be held, an election which had purposely been postponed and downgraded by Arblick to the point where the membership hardly was even aware or interested.

Arblick held the page in apparent disdain. His voice was sure and insulting.

"You stiffs think you're goin' to stir up something with this shit sheet, but all you're doin' is cuttin' your own throats!"

The knot of men, obviously unemployed, were murmuring. They wanted work. They needed work. They had to make wages.

"I know, but work's slow this year," Arblick agreed. "That ain't my fault. It's the goddamned government. Sure, you'll get on as soon as it picks up."

A dull-looking, dark-faced Polack took a deep, deliberate breath and yelled desperately, "All *your* gang is working! I got a family. Now you better start playing straight or I'm gonna. . . ."

"What the hell are you gonna . . . ?" Arblick yelled back. "You threatening *me?*"

The men were frozen for a second in angular strokes of violence, like an Orozco composition. Their arms and legs, their necks and heads and torsoes were bent against their fat master in absolute, murderous conflict. Only a threat of domestication kept their hands from suddenly filling with bloody machetes or scythes, and suddenly the threat snapped when Don rammed forward another couple of inches and yelled, "You lousy thieving sonofabitch!" and lashed a looping fist at Arblick's face.

Arblick dodged and threw his own glancing punch. In a rage, Don gripped the white silken shirt and ripped it off the pimp. Arblick bellowed with anger or fear or possible protest, and swung again, this time smashing Don's inviting nose.

Don's face exploded into a grinning wet mask of blood as he hacked at Arblick with his free hand. Arblick's bellow brought in his goons, fat stooges, reluctant, but impelled to fight.

One bore Don down from the rear so Arblick could crack another right to Don's already flattened, purple nose, and for no reason at all except that he couldn't stand to see Don held and hit, Jim came across the room cracking his bony elbow into Arblick's throat, sending him gagging, bluefaced, to the floor, and in another instant a goon had smashed Jim, and in the brief star-and-comet free-for-all that followed, Jim was kicked and trampled until he made it to the front door, wiped the blood from his face and watched the turbulence suddenly still as Don and a colored guy were left dazed on the floor. The dark-faced Polack was huddled in the corner hurt, his eyes hidden behind his arm.

Arblick was the victor if you could call it a victory. He stood hairless-chested, slug-pale, soft as sourdough, panting, bleeding from the nose and lips, his wavy hair down over his creampuff face.

"I'm tellin' you bastards," he growled in low hatred, "you better move out while the movin' is good. C'mon," he snapped at his three sub-pimps, and walked out.

"Well," Don cackled to the frozen room, "at least the bloodsucker earned his graft today."

He was painfully working his ruined nose back into a semblance of shape.

"Better get that beak to a croaker," Jim said. "You may need it to sneeze with."

"I know just how to do it," Don murmured. "I just wish we'd had a reporter here. The people would know what's happening."

"Next time?" Jim suggested.

"Next time," Don said, "the goons will have their heavy heat. You know?"

"Not really—" Jim said, wide awake.

"Oh, I don't mean for you," Don said, "I mean for me. You just have to keep out of their hair."

"But I got to get a job."

"I'd say your prospects for employment in Fairbanks are now decidedly limited." Don grinned a grimace. "You can stay in my basement if you'd like. We can scrounge enough to eat. . . . But we need a man who's savvy about newspapers. We got to get that fucking pimping fag exposed!"

Jim shook his head. "Maybe you better come over for supper tonight. We got plenty to eat. Joe's working."

"Good old Joe," Don said.

They walked outside into the blue daylight to Don's truck.

"Some day," Jim said, "maybe some day I'll get to say something about Arblick, the union pimp."

"He'll be in Congress if you don't hurry. Can't you see him in Washington, conning and crowding, passing out the girls, taking blue pictures, blackmailing, selling his own ass too, until all of a sudden, he's vice president. And boy, do you think his goons would stop at knocking off a president? Oh, boy. . . ."

"He'll never make it, he hasn't got the stuff."

"You don't know him. He'll make it unless we can organize against him and get an honest union going."

"I'll help," Jim said, "but I've got to get a job too."

Don let him out of the old truck and Jim walked, bloody, bowed, and vexedly toward the house.

Nomi . . . Don . . . Alaska. . . . What about me and mine? I got to think of myself too. Better be heading south before everything goes down the drain. He clambered up the steps, utterly whipped and without hope. This country and its people were apparently inimical to his old, easygoing nature.

Kitty met him at the door. Joe was working overtime, she said.

But seeing the blood and bruises on his face, she went weak-kneed. "Oh, Jim, oh, you damned fool! Whatever now?" and suddenly swept him into her arms as she cried and kissed the lumps and scratches on his weathered, weary face.

She was an eternal lover-mother. She had to sympathize with anything hurt, and she was desperate to love it too.

"Oh, Jim, you damned idiot . . ." she said huskily between kissses.

He gently tried to push her away. "Please, now, Shorty—no big scene. It was just a little YMCA tussle which ended in ping-pong. Me ping, you pong. . . ."

With a certain effort (he was thinking very clearly, goddamn, Jim, don't fuck up any worse than you are), he slipped clear, and murmured something about going to the john.

Once loose and safely in the bathroom, he washed his face, finding more lipstick than blood, combed his scraggly hair, changed his shirt, and came back into the living room hoping Kitty had cooled off. Not that he would mind banging her, but he already knew the trials of tying into a hysterical piece like that, and he became distant, clever.

"How'd you get beat up?"

"Took on the Fairbanks Federated Pederasts and lost me arse. Any mail?"

"Not much. Just a crazy note tacked on the door."

She tossed it over. It was written on a part of a brown paper bag in a huge and terrible scrawl:

> Jim, you go now out to Fire Prevention on Airport Road. Take cab. Hurry. It's a job. Be alert. Bullshit you can bookkeep too. Plenty money. Better things. Don't tell nobody. Take garlic salt. Don't get burned up. Fraternité, K——

"Who in hell is K——?" Jim asked.

"I dunno," Kitty said. "A dirty little old redfaced man. He said he knew you."

Jim headed for the door.

"What now?" Kitty was alarmed.

"Some kind of a job. The cobbler promised. Something to do with fires."

"Oh, God," Kitty groaned. "You?"

"Me." He remembered the rest of the note. "We got any garlic salt?"

She found a bottle in the kitchen.

"I guess I sprinkle that on the fire," he said doubtfully, wondering if it were a joke, but he was determined and excited. "Now if anything goes wrong, you'll write Frieda, and try to keep an eye on Nomi if she wanders by."

"Sure, sure, sure, sure."

And Jim turned to her, gripped her to his bony breast, kissed her fiercely, pushed her back and sprang out the door. When she looked out, he was running down the street like a goosed stork.

6

FIRE

THE CABBIE glanced in his mirror and asked innocently enough, "What's doing out at Fire Suppression . . . ?"

Remembering the cobbler's warning, Jim answered with a long, involved tale, that he was going to write an article about forest fires.

But the cabbie said, "Trouble is, ain't been no fires yet."

"Well, that'll come," Jim said vaguely. "Write the story first, get the facts later, that's the way reporters work, you know."

They drove a couple of miles through the outskirt slums of the South Side. There, bare-boarded as an abandoned chicken house, was the Steamboat Club, its parking lot empty, its door padlocked until midnight magic and the sea of vodka would somehow make it appear a palace.

Turning right they jounced and bounced off the rutted, chuckholed road into wilderness. Birch trees and spruce trees grew in rank profusion, and Jim was now wondering not only what he was going to do, he was wondering even where he was going.

Turning right again into a long lane immaculately maintained by State funds, they at last arrived in front of a neatly painted brown building, before which the stars and stripes fluttered from a peeled spruce pole.

"This is it," the cabbie said. "Two bucks."

Jim paid and ambled past the flagpole. He went through a screen door, a storm door, and on through a real wooden door into a warm room dominated by a heavy-set man behind a desk, and behind him a large, plastic map of the western territory, marked with red grease pencil. Bulletin boards, schedules, and red pins were skewered on a corkboard. The background music was the squeally static of a short-wave radio.

The man behind the desk was dressed all in green, and wore a badge. He was big, confident and slightly redfaced.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, looking up from the phone into which he'd been yelling.

"I want a job," Jim said.

The man in green was nonplused. "Holy Christ! How'd you get here so quick? I just got the call. You're the first firefighter this year."

"That's me," Jim smiled. "I can smell fire and smoke before anybody. I can't help it."

"All right," the big man said. "You might as well fill out this form. I just passed the word. There'll be a mob out here in a couple of minutes."

Jim suddenly felt sorry he hadn't called Don, but then, he hadn't known what he was getting into.

"Any other experience besides fighting fire?" the big man asked.

"Well, I've got a degree in bookkeeping and business administration," Jim lied.

"That's a rare article," the big man said. "Depends on your strawboss, but you'll probably be timekeeper. This is one hell of a big fire. North. On Porcupine Creek, near Anyuk."

Oh Christ, Jim said silently.

"Sure, Anyuk. That's O.K. by me," Jim said. "I like to get plenty of hiking and hard work though. I just don't like keeping books."

"You'll get aplenty of both," the big man said gratefully, taking the application form. "Who is your next of kin in case you're killed or hurt?"

Next of kin. The first instant in Jim's life that he'd ever considered it. He had no insurance, he had no reason ever to wonder about or thank or hate or whatever one does with Next of Kin, and thinking with almost a religious intensity, answered, "my wife. Frieda Carondelet, 535 Mono, Fresno, California."

This written down, the big man nodded and said, "Fine. You'll be on the first plane out."

And before he could inquire about the bottle of white powder in Jim's hand, a horde of workers in every conceivable dress burst in the doorway.

"Order! Order!" the big man yelled. "Make a line. There's work for everybody."

Jim waited out of the way, studying the enormous map, looking for Anyuk, which he at last found in an area of utter wilderness and streams and forest, hidden far, far north. A fire. A forest fire. Yes, of course. These were rangers and they would fight a forest fire and at that late minute, Jim finally understood what his job was to be. On the long slip of paper was his name and a bunch of blanks and dates, columns marked hours, and payment per hour, and then he saw, EFF, $4.00 per hour. Timekeeper, $.50 plus per hour. Strawboss, $.60 plus per hour. All this began to make sense. Only he couldn't quite figure how the cobbler had managed to set the fire so far away so soon. Or had he? Maybe they had an Eskimo drum message system, maybe the loon cried to him, "Hey, Mr. K——, we got a hot one up at Anyuk. Send men."

Jim slouched outside on the porch as a stream of men came in and out. Most of them were too old or too drunk or too crazy to hire.

Jim looked at the faces of the skidrow bums dredged up from God knows where, somewhere far below First Avenue: below river, under culvert, behind winebottlestack.

And then, and then, after that what? *Et puis, et puis en-*

core, Jim remembered; perhaps the saddest line in the world's literature.

He was distressed. He saw the blue skyline bright as inspiration, inexpressibly beautiful in the wilderness, and knowing the crummy, pimping cabs were hauling out the sludge of the town to join him to do something whatever it was, and at this particular moment he didn't give a damn what he was supposed to do to the wilderness, until suddenly coming around the cement walk came one singular individual whose hanging head reminded him of Nomi so much he thought at first it was she.

The same black hair. The same golden tan, the same stature, the same blue jeans, but the hair was bobbed, the drunken stagger an attempt at not being a drunken stagger.

The drunken Eskimo shambled the way Jim shambled in natural sobriety. Jim began to wonder about himself: first, he sees the man looking like his woman, and then he sees the man looking like himself, and what next? But there was really nothing more than the late afternoon light, the lovely spruce-splashed infinite skyline and sky, and the drunken Eskimo, filthy, eyes glazed as Jim could see now, and ninety per cent unconscious. Jim marveled that he could operate on the ten per cent he had left; to understand the fire call and hornswiggle a cab out here, and with a little luck make it through the door. As the Eskimo veered crosswise, a silly grin on his pockmarked face, Jim rose and held him up.

"Getahell way from me," the Eskimo muttered blindly to the arm which was keeping him from falling down the steps. "Getahell—"

Jim knew there was a connection between himself and this man and that they would not just end it here on this step.

"I'm Jim," he said sharply. "You're about to go in the door, now look smart, you damnfool Queequeg."

His mouth worked. "Me Bill," he said, "just dirty Siwash sonofabitch." He grinned at that and his broken, distorted teeth gave him a medieval, gargoyle look.

"Next of kin?" Jim asked.

"Mary Bear," Billy said fixedly, all rote. Utter discipline.

"O.K., get in there and last a couple of minutes, champ."

Billy straightened up, put a foolish, stupid, native-type grin on his dirty face and walked on into the office. Billy was the twentieth who had got in the door, and he was sixth man hired.

The green-uniformed ranger came out in a hurry, holding a bunch of the application forms. Jim straightened up. He held out his hand, and automatically the big ranger gave him the forms.

"You'll be timekeeper," he said. "Eli Blake will strawboss and that truck will take you to the airport."

Eli came out the door, a tall young man who might have come out of Yale, so much did he resemble an overbred collie dog. Even as they heard their instructions, the pickup truck stopped and Jim's group moved down the walk, as other men were dropping from cabs and running to the office.

"C'mon, Murphy," Billy muttered as he came alongside, "if you're goin' to fly, take a plane."

Tell me, Saint Baudelaire, Jim thought, am I bored to Spleen now?

They climbed into the back of the truck, the six of them. Blake, the Ivy Leaguer; Jim, the cadaverous nonentity; Billy Bear, the drunken native. As Blake introduced them, Jim met Merriweather, a small wasp-waist Negro, dressed in fancy yellow boots and peg-bottom slacks; Hank, a pale yellow-eyed, rabbit-toothed blond; and Beane, a young, square-jawed, black-rimmed-glassed man, unsmiling, an obvious college boy heading up some ladder of success.

Jim was not dismayed at the partners he'd suddenly acquired, he was dismayed at the prospect of flying high and parachuting down into the middle of a holocaust. The more he thought about it, the less frequently his chute opened, the farther he fell, the hotter the fire that awaited him. The truck rattled his backbones as it raced up the washboard airport road. A huge jet sat waiting, a block long, a most heavenly machine, an irony of a heavenly machine, because of its human, if however slight, fallibility. When not fallible, no one, not a fakir, not any monk, can come any closer than the soaring lifting gentleness of enormous planes. But what on earth was he thinking in those terms for? Because they sure as hell weren't going to be jumping from a jet.

As he worried, he noticed too the tools and duffel in the truck-bed that they sat upon: sleeping bags, a peculiar kind of an assbackwards ax, shovels, cans with harness and hoses on them.

—Oh, shit, I can't jump out of a plane with all this stuff. But I got to. My wife wants me to. My child to be wants me to. My God, I'll be a cremated cracklin' crisp and my poor little unborn child never know the love of his true father, and the relatives— Of course, they're out there cheering, Jump Jim, Jump boy! You can do it! And damn it, red queen, I'd jump for you and the baby, but maybe, just maybe, you'd like to have me stick around a while for laughs, to dandle the tad and tell tall stories of how I almost jumped from ten thousand feet into a raging forest fire . . . and chickened out—

But they were racing down the airport strip itself, skidding around beside a peculiar-looking thing which had no resemblance to the beautiful jet. It was, in fact, a war-surplus amphibious plane called a Grumman Goose. Its single wing held two enormous engines, and two small floats at each end. The boatlike body of the plane was held up by a couple of slender, inadequate-looking wheels, and, like a pregnant salmon, the cabin itself looked to be a swollen piece of fatigued aluminum with a few rusty portholes.

"What the hell?" Jim murmured.

Blake knew. "Our Goose," he said. "Land us at the fire."

"Say that again," Jim asked with shaking gratefulness.

"Nothing to it." Blake smiled confidently.

A tall man, a sort of a bum in brown pants and shirt, greasy and slept in, standing by the plane, yelled, "What the hell kept you?"

Blake laughed and yelled, "At ease, Mr. Filson."

Filson went back to checking his engines. Suddenly Jim realized this rude grease monkey must be the pilot. "Oh, Christ!"

They all grabbed tools, bags, gas masks, cans, whatever and carried them up a small ladder into the plane. It smelled of oil and age. They stacked the gear in a compartment in the tail of the plane, and when everything was securely stowed, they took seats.

Jim, in the center starboard seat, saw Billy, just behind him, finish off a bottle he'd hidden in his pocket, toss it aside, and commence snoring. Up forward Blake had taken the co-pilot's seat. My God, can Abercrombie Fitch fly too? Jim wondered as the others settled into the remaining seats.

Most everyone else was asleep or pretending sleep. Thank God, he thought, I don't have to refuse to jump. Thank God I didn't have to sign a loyalty oath some depraved, third-rate simpleton dreamed up for me.

But he was also soaking up the leather-lined atmosphere of the tired old plane. There were no formalities, no instructions. He still clutched the time cards of the men and nobody, by God, was going to get them away from him either.

Filson came aboard and locked the door behind him. Without bothering to look at his passengers, he bent forward into the pilot's compartment leaving the connecting door open.

He started the port engine first with a loud clap of backfire that made Jim jump uncontrollably. The bird shook and farted like a flatulent whale. Jim found a seat belt and buckled it tight. The starboard engine whined and turned and popped, drumming up a heavy, pulsating thunder. Jim felt slightly more at peace. Somewhere he'd heard that a two-engine plane could fly just as easily on one engine. So at least they would start out with two. Although, God knows, nobody had checked the cargo weight, and there was a hell of a pile of iron stuff back there. Well. . . .

The cabin still smelled of oil, but the fumes of wine were coming through, too, from Billy Bear. Jim felt a certain admiration. Here's a guy shows up for work dead drunk, passes out at the critical point, and here I am sitting scared shitless.

To calm himself as the engines pounded, sputtered and flamed and smoked and trembled, he hummed the deadly song in his head:

I brought you a dozen roses so red,
Roses of love I remember you said. . . .

But when the awkward, fullbellied machine suddenly lurched forward with exactly the same foolish motion of Billy Bear in liquor, Jim's heart sank again. In terror he composed his face to meet his maker, and prayed silently, Dear Heavenly Father, please let me live to see my child (that was safe), and feigned sleep like all the rest.

Suddenly he remembered Bear and, opening his eyes, his recollection was verified: Bear hadn't buckled his seat belt. As the plane bounced over the strip, Jim reached back and found the strap and buckled his limp comrade to his seat. He realized the big, swollen-bellied, scrap-aluminum bird was wheeling on one wheel, was roaring, was tense with incredibly powerful vibrations, was straining at the leash, and somewhere a green light showed, sending the old antique blasting down the runway.

Pray. Pray for Nomi. Pray, Jim said silently, but couldn't think of prayer. He watched the other planes on the strip and the buildings whip by. He felt the drag of the lifting machine and, lo and behold, he watched through the open hatchway the greasy pilot steering, lifting and flying blindly with his precious left hand while his attention and his right hand were directed at frantically cranking a winch which apparently had something to do with bringing the landing carriage and wheels up where they should be.

Jesus H. Christ, Jim thought, what a sonsabitchin' beautiful, wonderful, safe, perfectly engineered, marvelous, beautiful plane.

But as they rose up up up he figured if they could just get a little altitude, they might have a chance to belly-crash, but right now was the critical moment. Most of these bastards crashed right after takeoff, right at this instant where they had neither altitude nor power nor any place to land, totally vulnerable.

Unbelievably, the plane passed that critical instant and gained altitude and was obviously on a straight course north, and the engines settled into a working thunder and the props neatly chopped the air.

Jim was at peace. All they had to do was land safely. Yet when he saw a jagged gorge ahead, a canyon formed of two high, awful granite spires, enormous boar's tusks, he realized they had a long way to go. Instead of going over the peaks, the poor plane climbed as high as it could without dying, its engines laboring (Jim didn't need a bunch of dials to tell him they were pulling as hard and solid as a good team of horses on a plow in heavy gumbo), and they threaded the aisle through, with a rock fang on each wing, through the gray sky, snow whipped around the high gray granite never touched by a man's foot, never conquered, for there were higher peaks off to the west. These were just ordinary terrain, just simple plane killers. Jim felt a wondrous appreciation of the maneuvering plane, the bored, greasy pilot, the sleeping passengers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Hank was not sleeping. He was, if anything, more terrified than Jim. At seeing the rabbity face without color, Jim felt better, a veteran.

And the motor drone gradually became monotonous. The great human, he can adapt to anything, anything at all, which is his original sin because he can't stand boredom either.

As they cleared the mountains, a cosmic vista, a gigantic area of wilderness no one had ever explored, let alone defined, lay out before the plane that could see so far and wide.

Jim sank in his seat. The terror of flight was nothing compared to his emotion as he saw the endless land, green and brown and silver, with no horizon, only hundreds after hundreds of miles of nothing but forest and lakes, tundra and rivers. It was Eden in summer season.

Et puis, et puis encore . . . nothing nothing nothing.

O the beauty, the virginal green abundance, the manless earth, the unconquered, unknown, unbounded North. He wept because nothing else of land had ever stirred him. All else had been torn up, fucked up, shit upon, but not this. This was the way it *was*. Adam and Eve were in there. His soul was in there. Nomi's soul was in there. His wife's soul was in there. His unborn son was growing himself in there. God help us if it's all ever gone.

But far, far away a shag of smoke, a brown stain on the robin-egg sky.

Would Eden burn? Jim knew it burned. It burned every year.

Would Nomi burn burn burn burn? Oh, he knew of course she would.

And he too. Why not? Oh no!

But they were hurrying to the dirty, chocolate stain that coated the sun, that dimmed the brightness of the day.

It's work and money, Jim thought. Forget your idiocy. Forget your soul.

His wife wouldn't. She was secure in the cradle of Luther's idea of God. She would be in a heaven of pure white wool with a golden halo over her dazzling red hair, and she would not be within a million miles of space or time of the Jim who loved her. Ever.

Filson seemed to have a modicum of ability. He found the flame, the smoke, the hot falling forest beyond the Arctic Circle. A fire feared only because it might not stop, might blow right on south to engulf the territory.

The plane circled the creeping pillar of smoke and flame. Filson was pointing and Blake was listening as they made some simple plan which was totally unimportant, Jim could see, because these six, or even ten times six, weren't going to faze that blazing giant, even if Bear sobered up, even if Jim could actually walk in his stupidly inadequate shoes. But they would try. They would do something. If they survived, they would for goddamned sure cash a fat government check.

Filson circled the blazing forest. The sun was still high, though it was long after sunset anywhere else, and the heat draft was pushing against the circling outward fire, and there was a small wind pushing it southward. The smoke rose like a black lamb sacrifice, like an empty promise, like a premature autumn of the mind, and Jim started sucking in his gut as they circled tighter and tighter, Filson flying one-handed as he motioned here and there to Blake, who, Jim hoped, was getting the message.

After a third look, they zoomed down sharply to where spruce trees were spruce and birch were birch. They hovered and skimmed. They slowed and gunned, until Filson finally found the water he had pinpointed from on high.

It was a little pool, hardly the size of a raindrop. It was full of submerged logs and snags; it was surrounded by high, towering widow-making spruce; but Filson, the grease monkey, would get them there. Jim began to believe in what he named the Filson Myth: the eternally lucky bushpilot who could do anything with a plane but fly backwards—and in the right wind he could do that too.

Three times Filson passed over the narrow slough, doubting it, inviting it to strike at a bad ball, and finally, having made a successful count of seconds aloft over the landing stretch, he eased it down, dropping suddenly, then easing, then falling sickeningly, then easing, then almost at a stall and still not within that ring of tall, spiked spruce, and there, just as the tail cleared the final limb, Filson cut the power and the plane slumped. Almost unbelievably, it dropped ninety feet straight down and Jim knew that showoff Filson had killed them all.

The metal-loaded hull was even starting to tip over to the left as it crashed into the slough. Water went over the wings. Jim could see clear water bubbling over the top of the window, and the plane bounced up like a tennis ball, clear out of the water, for the moment airborne as Filson strove mightily to keep the wing horizontal, fighting that fatal tendency to tip. Everything amazingly quiet. Filson, Blake and Jim awake, fighting the water gods as the plane dropped under water again.

But this time the wing stayed higher and only the windows were below the surface, and as it bounced up again Jim thought, this is it: there's still the spruce at the end of the line.

He clutched again at his bony knees, while Filson was tickling the controls with speedy joy. The next time she flopped down the windows were not under water, were actually skimming along like a boat ride, and the plane slowed like a yacht coming to a peaceful anchorage. As it drifted up against the soft bank of reeds, the rabbit-faced Hank abruptly yelled, "In heaven's name! What are you trying to do?"

Such an outburst from such an ascetic-looking man awakened everyone, who of course, except for Bear, were all awake and scared to death anyway.

Filson looked back over his shoulder, unbuckling his straps, laughing. "Hell, I cut it a lot finer than that in the war. Pile out," he ordered. "You got a job, get at it."

Blake had already squirmed up through the forward compartment under the pilot's feet, opened the hatch and had taken a line to the rushy bank of the pond.

The men followed as Filson stood by, ready to boot anyone objecting right square in the ass as he crawled by. Filson was still the master of this ship. He would fly it or die with it, and that gave him the prerogative. The men passed their equipment hand-to-hand out onto the bank.

Six Pulaskis, as the double-bitted, contrary-planed ax was called, three shovels, three gas masks, four piss cans (five-gallon spray cans which could be strapped to a man's back), some condemned army C-rations, which were divided.

Billy Bear was dirty, vomity and crockery-eyed, but he was still hanging on. The two hours' sleep on the plane had leveled his binge onto a plateau down which he would have to descend, but Jim supposed it could be done. Once the plane left them, there would be no choice.

Then Jim realized Filson was really going to leave them. One day's rations, a curious ax, a piss can, a shovel, and six slips of paper. Where were they? Jim had no idea. He saw the pond and over a long skyline a blue-brown smoke. A wet kind of a field or park, which probably no man had ever seen, lay between them and the forest, and a low hill separated them from the actual fire.

As Blake came out of the plane hatch for the last time, Jim saw a walkie-talkie hung over his shoulder. Jim noticed too the material of the jacket on his shoulder, a very fine-woven, mustard-yellow duck with plenty of big pockets. Under that tough A & F windbreaker was a woolen Pendleton, and probably under that conservative wool plaid was a double-sewn Egyptian cotton thermal T-shirt made in France, and under that was the man who bought what he knew was best for the occasion and, like most Yale men, was right.

"O.K., you guys," Filson said. He was quiet, reserved, good-humored. An ex-bomber pilot of uncounted missions and medals, a man who'd come to Alaska for the quick money and the fun of flying, and all that klooch material, and stayed on. "Get lost."

Following Blake's example they waded into the pond, took the plane's tail and hoisted it back on the bank.

"Every foot," Blake said. "Every foot." Filson had to have every chance of getting out of his own frying pan. They heaved back the stern of the plane to the best possible take-off position, and providing one cylinder didn't just happen to cough at the wrong time, or if Filson happened not to get a cramp in his little finger, he had a fair chance of making it.

They stepped aside, a line of weak men already muddy and confused. Filson ignored them as he started the engines. He couldn't care less; he was all joy at the coming zoom and vault. As his gauges read normal and his ears registered a perfect mechanical harmony, he suddenly gunned the engines to a scream.

Jim quit breathing as the plane sprayed a storm astern and raced toward the opposite shore, where the straight spruces grew like tall masts. This was the incredible moment Filson loved best, when it was the fineness of his eye and gentleness of his hand and precision of his tuning that kept him alive and flying. No thrill could ever match the moment of the final uplifting surge, when he didn't really know whether he would be snagged and smashed back down again by a limb or tree higher than he'd measured by the shading of an eye. This time as he cranked wheels and pulled back on the steering column, he noticed with a sense of glee an extra tall spruce growing in the second row of trees, one which he hadn't seen or predicted. He edged the left wing up a feather's width to create an angle of flight that would clear the obstacle, without entangling the right wing with another.

Jim saw the trees and the hull and a couple of feet of blue sky in between, and then suddenly Filson, like a dutiful bee, was gone, his thunder only an echo. The pond still churned violently, but Filson was ten miles south by now and no doubt bored stiff.

They looked at each other. Blake, the Yale man, dressed with perfect awareness of the problem, from his clothes to his sheath knife to his watch to his camera. Merriweather, the strange, skinny Negro who should have been shooting pool in Harlem. Hank, whose pale blue eyes and workingman's neat exterior were still an enigma. Beane, the iron-faced, owl-eyed kid, energetic and competent. Billy Bear, still drunk. And Old Birdlegs himself, wearing his faded, flapping brown pants, an old flannel shirt and his ex-army brogans.

What a spot! he thought. Six nincompoops ten thousand miles from home.

"We'll head for the fire while Filson flies in more crews," Blake said matter-of-factly. "I'll try to keep to the high ground, but it won't be easy."

"Y'all been out heah before, suh?" Merriweather said.

"Some," said Blake. "We can do it."

Jim admired them both for the exchange.

"Can we eat?" Hank asked.

"Let's wait. I'd rather stop on dry ground."

They all realized Blake made sense, because they could just sit down in the low pools of water and eat everything cold, but no one could build a fire in this shallow water, broken up by hummocks of curious grass commonly called "niggerheads"—which no one could say so long as they had Merriweather along, no one, that is, except Billy Bear who, after surveying a hundred acres of the wet swamp, said disgustedly, "Look at the goddamned niggerheads."

They waded off. Some had waterproof boots, but the water was often over their boot tops. Jim's leaky work shoes turned out to be ideal. Water leaked in and leaked out. Following Blake in single file across the wet swamp, heading directly for the fire, they kept quiet until they were up to their chests in water, when Merriweather said, "Say, can we stop for a swim?"

Indefatigable Eli Blake knew he was asking too much. "O.K.," he accepted his mistake, "we're in too deep. We'll have to cut off to the right."

They accepted it too. Beane had a cross-eyed smile and was probably thinking he could have done better, but he was biding.

Jim, at the end of the line, was conscious that items of equipment were being lost or surreptitiously discarded. He started to speak, but realized this was the nature of man and organizations. You throw away everything you can, it's the one chance you have to assert.

Merriweather said quietly to himself, "Shee-eeet," and tossed his goggled gas mask on a niggerhead, as if to enclose and exhalate the clump of grass.

A piss can came floating by. A shovel handle bobbed behind. An empty canvas pack, a Pulaski flat in the water.

After a half hour of sweating and floundering from one hole to another, Bear turned aside. Jim grabbed him. He was sickly pale. His eyes shut.

"Lemme go," he muttered.

But Jim stayed with him until he heaved. Bear was sweating like a fresh-skinned hog, oily, wet, white as a pearl, his eyes like raw oysters. The others ahead were not aware.

"Never been lost in my life," Bear mumbled through his broad, broken teeth. It was about the first sensible thing he'd said. But now blood was flowing again in his veins. His eyes were less opaque, his face less like an unbaked pie.

"Let's go, Queequeg," Jim said, afraid to be separated from the rest who were sloshing on through the swamp at right angles to the fire to reach higher ground.

"Don' worra," Bear said. "I'll guide. Me Siwash."

Jim pushed ahead as if to get out of Bear's vomit, but really to crowd him into moving along. No one had waited.

They slogged. To what purpose? Jim wondered. Free as birds. No nothing within hundreds of miles now. Why not crawl under a tree and let the world go to hell? Sit, eat, sleep.

As Blake led them to a somewhat dry sidehill, the crew gave little cheers of wonder. The fire was still half a mile away and burning along at a steady, expanding rate.

With no command or order, they lay down a moment, and as Blake started a small twig fire, they opened their tins of food and warmed them on improvised trivets. Once the green cans were emptied of cigarettes, chewing gum, powdered milk, and sundries, they dipped water from the swamp, boiled the cup-sized cans over the fire and added instant coffee. In the magic of cooking over a common fire, they achieved a sort of unity and common purpose. They were six against not only a large and unusual forest fire, but they were six against a wilderness.

"Who's timekeeper?" Beane asked forcefully, positively, as if to say: I am the timekeeper.

But old Jim patted his breast pocket easily. "Me."

"Don't lose those pay slips," Beane said.

"Don't lose yourself," Jim said, looking up. It was enough. It set the order. Blake, Carondelet, and then the workers.

"O.K.," Blake said eagerly, "let's get to it."

"Sho now," Merriweather said. "We might get cold tonight."

They left their empty cans. A thousand years from now the Toynbees would call it the tin-can age.

They moved off again on fairly dry ground now, sticking to the side of the long, low hill. The footing was leafy and deep with moss. Overhead were big birch and spruce. As they went higher there was nothing except spruce and low bushes, blooming, giving off a sharp spicy scent. Little wild flowers, miniatures, all the more bedazzling, poked out from under the low bushes.

An empty gasp of wind dropped ashes upon them. There was heat in the air, and a smoky incense odor of fragrant wood burning. A forest afire, high above the Arctic Circle, where no one except a trapper or two would give a good goddamn about it. The trees too small to saw, the mill too far to haul them, the market glutted, there was no value at all except that value a man puts on a living, immature growth which he intends should reach an age to properly die in.

They pushed on. Rabbit-faced Hank was beginning to lag even as they heard and saw the second plane load pass over to land somewhere, probably farther away because Filson had had his thrill for today. It would take hours for everyone to join up.

When they came over the crest of the hill, there was the fire itself. Not a leaping, crazy, twisting gyration of flame, but rather a slowly widening circle in which one tree at a time went *swush,* lighted like a torch, then dropped, scattering sparks to the muskeg below, kindling the one next to it. It was not fast, but still Blake decided the best way would be to start off to one side and work around to the heavy front, inasmuch as the night was coming.

"I hope you're keeping time," Beane said, glaring through his black-rimmed, judicial glasses.

"Loan me your watch," Jim said. "What day is it?"

Beane turned away flustered, not answering.

They found an outer edge of fire which was crawling through moss toward another long grove of spruce. Immediately Blake started hacking out the moss. Water oozed up as a moat the fire could not cross. He directed the others to follow and widen his trench.

They had to stop and regroup at a patch of merrily burning brush. There were only Jim's and Blake's piss cans left. They filled these at a mossy hole full of water and, by pumping and spraying, they knocked down the high flames so that Merriweather and the others could come along with Pulaskis to shovel and trench out and isolate the slowly expanding heat.

They worked steadily for nearly two hours and were making some small progress toward containment. As they began to slack off, the other crews arrived. They were the same motley crew of men: old, young, all colors, shapes, sizes and temperament. They had another strawboss with them: a competent but tired, middle-aged sourdough named Steadman. Some were willing workers, some unwilling. There was little discipline and no overseer to drive them. By now there were twenty-four men plodding along with piss cans, shovels and Pulaskis. They marched along the line of fire, chopping out burning snags, shoveling back the smoldering moss, just keeping track of the fire itself, which, under the afternoon sun, was expanding too fast to keep up with.

Once Jim saw, over a long stretch of gray-smoldering ash, a distant hill burst into heavy flames. It was over a mile away.

"My God," he said to Blake, who was vigorously setting an example by beating out a blaze in his path, "We'll never catch up with it."

Blake cheerfully studied the far flame and smoke for a moment. "Be surprised," he said, his white, big teeth shining. "Soon as the sun sets she'll cool off and we'll get our licks in. Have it ringed by morning if we're lucky."

Once the men were on the scene and saw the enormous effort required, their ambition cooled, their movements often were slack and desultory. Blake was the principal exception. He was all vigor, all energy. He was doing as much work by himself as a half-dozen of his weaker, less energetic crew members, including Jim. Some idlers stopped off with their little cans of C-rations and brewed up coffee and sat in the warm ashes.

Jim nervously observed the nature of the fire, which, as far as anyone would ever know, must have been started by a lightning strike. Inside the burned-over area were little islands of living timber surviving because of the wet muskeg around them. Blake was checking through these islands, looking for the best place to set up a base camp.

Jim had supposed that there would be a great bustle, a furious battle, man pitting his strength against driving flame. People staggering into palls of smoke, emerging scorched and blackened. But it turned out to be an average afternoon, and they slowly tagged along the edge of the fire, which, for the most part, had been put out by wet muskeg or simply a lack of anything further to burn. Blake was extra careful to put out the little beds of coals which still survived at the burned edge and which might conceivably start up a fire again behind them, finger out and trap them.

Billy Bear was coming alive too. He was sweating a ghastly scum, and his eyes were clearing like clouds scudding away from stars, and his back was somehow straightening into a decent stance.

Beane was watching to see that the others were working at least as hard as he was.

Blake was tearing around like a roany bull from the mountain, never raising his voice, hardly ever ordering or even suggesting, only generating a movement out of his own personal cyclone.

As the sun hovered on the horizon, Blake settled on an island of unburned timber by a large blackened meadow, a small slough half surrounding the spruce knoll. He laid out a cross of red plastic material in the middle of the meadow so that Filson could see the camp, and as the plane chugged over the area again, Blake spoke to him on the walkie-talkie.

The plane aimed at the red marker and lined over low and slow. The door on the back was open, and as Filson gave a signal, someone in the back threw out cases of C-rations padded with condemned army sleeping bags.

The plane flew over one last time. Filson waggled the wings and buzzed off far over the horizon.

Jim felt very much alone. There was no doctor. There was no grocery store. No communications. They were marooned in the midst of a huge rolling forest fire, far out in a wilderness never seen by white man.

But Billy Bear was straightening out, and as the plane left them alone to conquer the fire and exist in the woods, his head lifted a little higher. His jaw was a little firmer.

"You and me. We make camp," he said to Jim, and proceeded to notch a six-inch-thick spruce at a head-high spot so that it fell, without completely breaking loose, alongside another spruce some eight feet away. After cutting off the extra length, he lifted up the sagging end and secured it into a crotch of the other tree, thus forming a ridge pole. The remaining branches and limbs, besides other small spruce that he cut and lopped off, were leaned against the ridge pole and in a few minutes there appeared a covered area big enough for two men to sleep in.

"It's not going to rain," Jim said.

"Maybe not, but I like a roof," Billy said. The fact that he would be working all night made no difference.

Jim wandered around, collecting the time slips from the eighteen other men who had come in later planes. Almost everyone spoke pleasantly to him, suggesting that the more hours he could put down the more likable he would be. His mind, however, was greedily intent upon putting down all the hours he could for himself, and if that meant he had to carry the rest, then he'd do that too.

Time equals energy times insight over hunger, squared. Jim anxiously studied the problem of how to get more than twenty-four hours out of a day. He knew most of the literary devices of time, but this wasn't a matter of conceits, it was a very serious matter of money. He needed an Einstein to create a new dimension. He was considering simply announcing that henceforth every day would have forty-eight hours, but chances were Blake, the ultimate arbiter, might not have that much imagination. The problem would take considerable thought, but, being timekeeper, he had the time.

As the camp was assembled and little fires were built to heat coffee and C-rations, Blake went to his secondary strawboss, Steadman, and sketched the shape of the fire on the ground as he had seen it from the air. He also noted that the Kuskokwim River was on their right flank and the fire wouldn't jump that unless a hell of a wind came up.

"Anyway," he said, "we want to head off the windward edge and then come back in on the left."

"How long will it take?" Jim asked.

"Could be over tonight, if we're lucky," Blake said.

Jim, who had visions of hours and dollars all multiplying each other, felt let down, but Blake added, "of course, that's just to check it. It'll take at least a week to kill the hot spots."

He looked at Jim. "The standard rule is, we can't leave until twenty-four hours after the last smoke is seen. Don't worry, you'll be glad to get out and back to town before we're through."

Jim was satisfied then. No matter what happened, providing he didn't chop a leg off, or a tree didn't fall on him, or he didn't get some virulent Arctic disease, or didn't starve to death, or get caught in a backdraft, or didn't get eaten by a brown bear, or split by a moose, or didn't crash on the plane back, he would make a little money this summer for the wellbeing of his family.

—A minimum of twenty-four hours a day, that's about a hundred bucks, then stretch it out a week, that's seven hundred a week and who knows, there may be smoke even after seven days. If I could stretch the fire out three months, that'd make it close to eighty-five hundred for the season—

But he was only fiddling. They would never give him or anyone else eighty-five hundred to sit out here and light fires every morning or put them out every night. And then he knew he was caught on a cross of money against the precious time he should be spending with Nomi—time he should be helping her, guiding, and steadily saving. Money leaked in, life leaked out.

Blake decided to send Steadman and his crew one way and take the other group the opposite way, and they would work around the fire until they reached the river.

"Make sure everybody has enough to eat, then we go all night."

Steadman nodded sagely and left to heat up his own supper.

Billy Bear had laid moss in his lean-to, and put Jim's and Blake's sleeping bags alongside his own. He had built a small, steady fire in a pit and set in a few stones for a trivet and had cleaned the small brush out of the camp, cut down a half-burned tree which conceivably might fall on them as they rested. In every way possible, he had prepared for their comfort and security.

Blake took his custom-made boots off and poured the water out, hung his lamb's wool socks on a rack Billy had prepared, and selected a can labeled hamburger and gravy from the supplies.

"Next to being out in the boondocks, I like to eat," he said cheerfully.

Nearby were the others of the plane: Merriweather was self-sufficient; Hank was still pale and taciturn; Beane had somehow isolated himself while seeming to be sharing in with the others. His sleeping bag was on a slight elevation. His C-rations were in a separate, neat pile. He was writing in a notebook and ignored the banter of curiosity at what he was writing.

Jim took off his shoes, hoping to dry out his own scrawny feet. He was thinking of the strange circumstances of leaving a shoe to get a nail taken out and ending up, as a result, somewhere near the Kuskokwim River above the Arctic Circle with twenty-three mad, hungry men. Already itching from the ashes and spruce char, already a shade darker from the wisping smoke, Jim himself was exhilarated by the ancient wilderness where no fellowship would ever have gotten him, in an Alaska no one but the rare, lucky ones ever saw. He took out a can, drab G.I.-painted, black-stenciled "chicken and noodles."

"How do you open these things?" he asked Bear.

A tiny, hingelike piece of metal fell into his hand. He realized the point was to go into a can somewhere, and as he surreptitiously tried to get the curious opener into whatever position it was supposed to go, he wondered where the book of instructions was. The midget opener was simply not going to get the job done. He recalled seeing Blake do it, but all he succeeded in doing was sticking his thumb.

"Lemme show you," Billy Bear said, his broken teeth grinning like an old dog's.

Jim said, "I'll get it in just a second."

"You'll bleed to death," Billy said.

Jim helplessly handed can and opener over and let Billy demonstrate the mechanical process.

Quite easily Jim could sit back from the fire and observe the group, himself included, and he could see how sparse he was, how rigidly he held his shoulders. He seemed untouched in comparison to the others, but he couldn't help reckoning his own history: army, education, art, show biz, wife, poverty, Nomi, and here. How could he be untouched? Surely something had gouged a gash from him, or bent him, hurt him, or built him, but he could not see that he had ever been touched, or substantially moved. He was simply the Midnight Special tearing down the tracks through upland and lowland, storm and sun, and sooner or later would arrive at a little depot marked Death, unscarred, unbroken, unhealed.

"Dig in," Bear said, handing the open can to him.

Jim opened his pocket knife and dipped a bit of the cold, congealed stuff into his mouth. He couldn't go it.

He offered the can back to Bear. "You hungry?"

"Warm it up," Bear said. "It'll taste better warmed up."

Jim agreeably placed the can on a bed of coals. It didn't bother him much one way or another. He didn't really like to eat. He didn't even like to sleep. Not thinking in terms of good or bad or whether it's better to give or grab, only that he himself couldn't keep anything or add on or attract or fatten on anything.

His wife was a woman beloved, surely, but couldn't he have gone along without her?

Nomi? No, he wasn't sure. She had a rusty spike driven in his heart, down which his blood dripped slowly. Yes, she had a barbed claw in his side, she would mark him, was marking him. Why hadn't she just gone to see the doctor, damn it?

"It's burning," Bear said, lifting the smoking can off the fire, the calluses on his fingers melting but not hurting. He placed the can in front of Jim. "Try it now."

Jim obliged again, spearing up a slab of hot canned chicken which had no flavor. He chewed absently.

It occurred to him that he wasn't in any particular state other than simple fatigue. He was just plain tired out.

"Been a long day," he said.

"All night yet, too," Blake said. "Best knock it down while it's cool. Tomorrow will be too late, and it could be dangerous."

Blake put on his wet socks and boots, leaped to his feet and busied about lining up men, tools, and directions. He seemed ready to eat that fire up all by himself. He was a slashed-nosed war stud, anxious to get at the battle, and in the distance, as the light faded somewhat and the sun disappeared, the cloud of smoke gradually declined to a simple, lingering haze.

"Fire's out," Jim said regretfully.

"For now," Bear said. "Tomorrow the sun makes it go like gas."

"Let's move," Jim yelled. "Let's give 'em the old razzmatazz!" He blew the cavalry charge call through his nose.

The men got to their feet. Steadman was heard directing his group to the south. Blake appeared with all sorts of accouterments tied onto his back.

Ready, set, go. Blake almost sprinted from the island of spruce toward the point where Steadman's crew had turned south.

The men loosened out in an easy line following along the curved, serrated fireline as they had done earlier. In a few hours they had learned what they could do and should do.

Which, after all, wasn't much.

Blake, by himself, leading the way, did most of the work. He scraped and hacked out every live coal along the edge that might break the fireline the next day. The others followed, desultorily swatting a spark here, stamping a live coal there, widening the trench a bit, observing the mighty work of their leader with a critical eye.

When Blake stopped to rest, they all rested. Perhaps without the encouragement of his crew he could have been as weak as they, but with them behind him he was crashing and smothering and driving up the fireline at a huge rate. His voice rang out with high spirits through the darkening boondocks: "Catch that spark there if you can, move that snag back a little, let's see if we can't dig a water station here in this sump."

It was never quite dark, though the sun was down. Now when they paused for a rest they could feel a chill, probably coming up through the ground as much as coming down through the air. It was a cold country needing full sun to make it flammable.

The nature of the ground substance was dry moss over wet moss, or a grassy, coarse stuff living on dead stuff. Sometimes there were what Billy Bear identified as lowbush cranberries, little brave bushes bearing red berries that grew about a foot off the peat moss. The spruce and birch grew in this too, though the clean, soft birch liked more water and were usually in lower, boggy spots. But even the higher ground was principally humus, with very little real earth mixed in. The small spruce trees standing only forty or fifty feet high were vulnerable in this soil because their roots were restricted to the humus above the real soil: the permafrost.

"Ground is full of water," Bear explained. "Water freezes all year, so ground is frozen too." Like ice cream.

"Nothing grows in the permafrost. Roots have to spread out like a flat foot, can't go down. They got to spread."

Thousands of spruce undamaged by the fire itself fell down simply because the fire nibbled away, like a pink coal in punk, at the humus, until it came to the icy earth itself only a couple of feet below the surface, where neither root could grow nor fire could burn. It was the case then of the fire being a foot fire instead of a crown fire. With a slight sigh, the green trees toppled.

Jim was walking along, hacking briefly at this or that to keep busy, when he heard that sigh, looked up and saw a tree as tall as a telephone pole falling, for no reason, straight at him. Transfixed, he watched it come, not resigned, just waiting.

Bear rammed him aside, and only the branches whipped Jim's face, making his eyes tear. Blake was already lunging forward a hundred yards up the line. Neither he nor the rest saw it, except Beane, who was bringing up a reluctant rear.

"Better watch it," Bear said. "It's three days before we see the plane again. No help nowhere."

What will my child say of me? It was perhaps the first time he had thought such a thought. It is the end, he answered himself.

They were advancing heavily up a sidehill now. The spruce seemed to flourish on the sides of hills rather than on the long tundra. The embers here lying under the white ash were cherry red and melted the soles of their boots. An ancient stump almost obliterated by a rising crust of moss several feet thick could make a fiery trap like a burning pit as big as a barrel.

Somehow Beane was bugging him. Probably wishing him a hotfoot.

They came to a steeper section of the hillside, where the steepness itself created a burning draft and fire crackled and spit from the lowbush cranberries and taller brush and young spruce growth, and it was going to be ticklish to pass. Blake couldn't do it by himself. He tried, thrashing like a wild elephant into the fire, but he retreated with the hair burned off his wrists and eyebrows.

"Piss can!" he yelled.

Hank and Bear, who had been lugging the cans full of water, came up.

"Follow me close and spray what I miss," he said. "The rest follow."

Blake cut and trimmed a young spruce and beckoned to the piss-canners. The rest, weary and bored, followed along.

Blake shoved again into the head-high fireline and commenced beating at the blaze with his spruce tree. He knocked down fire, leaves, sparks and all, as he progressed with his incredible vigor, and Bear followed, pumping his spray as best he could at flames Blake passed by. Hank followed Bear, hitting anything around with a squirt. Merriweather, Beane and Jim followed with their hand tools, hacking out the still-smoldering bushes, tossing them back inside the burn.

The flames crackled; Blake was roaring a battle cry; Jim was nervously croaking Ho! Ho! Ho! in reply; smoke choked them. The only one who was really living, Jim decided, was Blake, and possibly the reborn Bear. Where else could you find such wild excitement? There was nothing more fearful than firetrap, more primordial and instinctive; yet hour by hour the main effort was dull, sleepy, unconcerned.

The perimeter of fire was being beaten and chopped, macerated and wetted into a black, charred edge of a forest. Blake continued over the hot ridge, on downhill, where there was only a creeping smolder edging outward. The men edged this burn with a trench deep enough to touch moisture, strangling off the fire from the virgin forest.

By now they all felt like professionals. Billy Bear, most obviously and dramatically transformed, having excreted the gray puke that had billowed him in stringy mucous eras of alcoholic oblivion, now smelled a bit better. Now, no cleaner, no smarter, no richer, suddenly on his own ground in his own place, in his own earth's arms, he was a man. He became considerate and helpful. He not only carried a piss can, he was also working as hard as Blake with the Pulaski. He had become, through the simple returning, a man as dynamic and as competent as the sober, driving Yale man. Bear's movements were quick. His shoulders lifted gradually into a yoke of iron. His backbone firmed into a pillar of oak.

Jim considered Bear's virtues as he watched the Eskimo hoist a huge burden of tools and supplies on his back. It was a hell of a lot more than wife-sharing. You shared the kill, the meat, the house, the skin, the kayak—you shared it all, because there would never be enough to go around, because you loved life to the point where you could hang the children one by one with sinew nooses to save them from the horror of starvation, could set the old people adrift on the long ice as bear food, and could break the wolf to harness.

"Yes. My father did it," Bear said. "Not me."

"Your father?"

"Maybe not my real father. Probably my father was a trader passing through the village in berry time. But the man I learned most from I call my father. He was called Happyman. He had the best sled dogs and the first rifle. He went and helped this explorer, Stefansson, for a couple of years. He did a lot of things. He could kill polar bear with spear. He was the best hunter in village. Every fall big potlatch. Give away everything. He had three wives, you know, so the trader had room. I dunno, I guess nobody knows. My mother would never say or never knew, but they said I looked like the trader, and everybody liked him. You know, he wasn't just a crummy dumb sonobitchin' white man, he was a trader who had no home. . . ."

They moved through the night that turned cold and dark, their only landmark the edge of the fire itself. So long as they ate up the frazzled, smoldering line, they were not lost. In the middle of the short, black night, they paused at a comfortable spot on a sidehill and cooked another tin of C-rations, ate another cracker and piece of chocolate.

Into the night they proceeded, smacking and kicking at little hotspots of embers, isolating the fire from its food. On their right was the paleness of new ash, on their left was the gray-green tinder of moss, tundra, muskeg. Sometimes they waded knee deep across peat bogs which had burned over but which still rose in spongy wet as if to grow forever, yet to accomplish nothing more than perhaps to make coal for chilly people some millions of years hence. What did it signify?

They reached the river about dawn or slightly after, because somehow the sun didn't really rise. It sloped up from the side. It sneaked across by its own light. Now there would be a warming of the landscape, warming of the chilled embers, warming up of the breakfast over the fire. If they had done well, there would be no extension. If they had been careless, there would be no surcease.

What a beautiful river in the dawn. Clear, very fast and deep, lined with sandbanks and an occasional inletted sandbar, a perfect boulevard for a canoe. Tall, grand timber lined the absolutely lonely stream. How? Such purity, such nature. How was it untouched?

The waters rippled, rippled cold and clear. No doubt small gold dust laved along as dirt in the quick summer stream. In winter it would be solid ice, a perfect highway for sled travel or even, say, to drag in the hide and meat of the bear found snoozing in any icy cave.

What a party! What a winter! The winter Birdlegs killed the big brown bear. What a feat! His three wives were busy all winter long chewing up that bearskin for pants.

"Get a little sleep," Blake said. "I'm going to check back on the line."

That Blake, he wouldn't give up. They crawled into the bags which Bear had doubled back and brought, along with a case of C-rations. Murmuring offhand jokes at him, "good old Poppa Bear," and such nonsense, and finding comfortable spots in the shade by the river, they dozed off—everyone except Jim.

Jim was worried. It would take only a few days to move in on the center of the burn and quench the hotspots. He looked at his watch. They had been out of Fairbanks fourteen hours. Well, call that at least twenty-four.

Beane was up and pissing in the river. He squirted a yellow, heavy, waving fountain of urine, heavy with his waste, into the rippling, shining waters.

Jim looked away. He knew now he should have sabotaged the fire fight. What the hell, it was just moss and long unknown forest. It was only more of the government gravy train that most of the world was on, so long as it would last. He might as well have chucked a shovelful of coals across the line. Make it last. Collect the money. How could he think these thoughts by that beautiful river which in itself corrected and denied him?

Huge black flies rose out of the morning, hungry for blood in the sun while he dreamed of vague, stalking, smoky characters on a stage. Nomi. Frieda. His not-yet son. Poets and peasants, soldiers and priests. The horseflies landed and sank their stony tubes of tongues into the sleeping men. Where could this sudden pain come from? Why were there swarms of these horny winged creatures suddenly driving in to riddle their bodies? They groaned and slapped against the big flies and killed great numbers of them, but there were always more. They were trapped in nowhere and being eaten alive by the fanatical flies whose death was nothing so long as the luscious blood had been sampled. Suicide was worth the powerful perfume of these juicy, warmblooded, thin-skinned creatures in the coldblooded land.

They hid under the hot sleeping bags which resisted their winged enemies but which made sleep a nightmare of stifled breathing. They scratched at little sores made worse by the coating of wood ash already ground into their crotches and wet-dry feet.

Hardly had they settled into a hot, overblanketed slumber than Blake and Bear returned. Even Blake was beginning to tire.

"Up and at 'em, boys," he called, his throat full of char and ash. "She's jumped out north."

Jim looked out. North. North. He figured where or what north was. Oh, north— He swatted a horsefly sucking his leg. North was Steadman's route. Naturally.

"Shake a leg, boys. You didn't come up here to feed the flies, did you?"

The heated sleep, horsefly-hidden, the caustic chafing clothes, the tiredness of a long, aching night, and he dreamt of Nomi, crying, "Beanpole beanpole beanpole, peabrain peabrain peabrain." He answered, "O come to me." She lowered over.

"North! North! Bear a hand, boys. She's jumped Steadman's line, we got to help."

"Rise 'em up, Jim. Grab a sock, boys."

With a dull waking sweatiness Jim faced the prospect of going away from the once-pure running river and following a dirty fire burning ahead like a flood. The crew moved with a glassy eye and a jaded step, all except for Bear and Blake.

Those two grew stronger. Like Antaeus, they were back on their own ground and, touching it, were renewed. What connection the wiry, stocky, walnut-brown Eskimo had with the incredible Nordic scion of Boston, Jim could not fathom, but there was indeed a connection, a bloodline.

What a comedy routine. Jim snorted, putting away his dreams of lynx-eyed Nomi, and crawling to his feet with the rest, looking out to the north at a new spiral of smoke rushing over a distant ridge.

They moved off, packs now mountainous on their backs as they had gradually accumulated food and gear. Bear made a point of carrying twice as much as anyone else now. He moved with hardly a word, always keeping to the front with Blake, while Jim lingered in the rear, trying to get himself organized, sufficient, integrated.

They walked cross country through low, grazed willows which beat at their shins and raveled and ripped their pants legs. There were other low bushes with ripening berries, blue berries, orange raspberries called salmon berries, and a few fragile wild roses.

There was the ever-present sense that the country was afloat. Their little island where they had briefly camped was long since gone and forgotten. Bear had packed everything out for them to the river during the morning, now they carried their camp on their backs away and north, miles toward the lost and running fire.

They hurried, fatigue tripping them in the Arctic willows.

Screw the government time clock.

It would now be a total experience of beginning to end; the fire, its own force and time, seeing to that; the fire not waiting.

7

BEAR

BEING THE only white-collar man on the job, Jim was not always obliged to fight fire with Pulaski and piss can. He could sit around the camp and doodle with the time cards, could make a pretense of keeping track of the stores dropped by Filson.

Every third day they faced starvation, but every third day Filson flew over in the fat-bellied, antediluvian amphibian and threw out the boxes of C-rations to them. In time certain articles in these boxes began to acquire ego values.

Jim deliberately planted the rumor that the hamburger patties with gravy were most popular because Jim himself couldn't stomach them. Not long after, Beane was offering three chicken-with-noodles for one hamburger patty with gravy, two ham and lima beans, and so on. All Jim wanted out of any of it was the chewing gum.

After two weeks of C-rations three times a day, they hated it all, excepting their psychological desire for hamburger patties with gravy; but as the days had gone by and the fire itself was contained more by swamps and rivers than by the men themselves, they were able to establish a sort of permanent camp.

Bear built a quick but tidy lean-to for himself and Blake and Jim. The others followed suit, and in time the entire crew was loosely congregated in a valley. Jim sent out alternate shifts every twelve hours to put out the deep moss fires, and, Jim supposed, to start new ones. There seemed to be no end to them, and he was getting sick to the teeth with gritty ash, with green cans, with sore, dry crotch; he even remarked that his shit was the same shade of green as a C-ration can, and all nodded in agreement.

The people in Jim's camp became comrades, veterans, having fought together through fire and smoke, stood up to the potential bear and shared against the third day of almost hunger.

Merriweather lingered over a smoldering eye of moss, thoroughly bored and disappointed, but like the rest, loving the paper hours Jim was putting down every day and counting the money up every hour or less—so that a man might have four hundred and sixty dollars coming and a half-hour later might remark to no one at all, but say aloud, "Four hundred sixty-two dollars," and again, half an hour after that, "Four hundred sixty-four dollars"—but just now Merriweather, the grimy-faced little Negro whose pleated slacks were in utter rags to the knees and were mended here and there with slivers of willow and whose bright yellow chukka boots were held together with wire salvaged from the C-ration boxes, spat at the smoky blue, hot moss and said to Jim, "Now I remembers that damned Skee-mo."

He referred to Billy Bear who was striding by, a slight smile on his bearded face, his eyes crisp and cool blue, his back straight—a veritable mountain of industry, a one-man St. Vincent de Paul, inasmuch as he was taking care of everyone whether they wanted it or not.

"You know, that husky, he's got a family somewhere out this way, and you know that bastard hasn't even been home in three years? I 'member now, I do," he said.

"You sure?"

"Man, I'm sure. He was abawlin' and carryin' on, man, I know him. They all look alike, but he don't."

"In Fairbanks?"

"Sure. He comes in with a big check. I got a couple girls workin', y'know, and here he comes, every lousy damned time. I don' care, see, I like his money same as anybody, but the sonofabitch, he could have sent a little trinket or even a little money order to his family out here. But he likes to be a fuckin' pig. Blind, pissyass drunk he is, and he brings us the loot and it may take a week to pick a grand off him, but we do it. Sure. But what is his wife'n family goin' to do in the winter, I say. I say fuck the half-breed sonofabitch."

"Why care?" Jim asked curiously.

"Care! I don't care. Not about him. He spends his loot, we throw him out, the cops grab him and next morning the piss-in-his-pants motherfucker is sweepin' the streets. I always throw a bunch of used rubbers out whenever I see him sweepin' streets."

"But why?"

" 'Cause of his family, don' you see? That ain't no way to treat a family. He left a wife and three kids out here somewhere on a river in a little cabin. They been waitin' three years for big shot to come home rich."

"Poor Billy—"

"Sure, poor Billy!" Merriweather nodded bitterly. " 'Course, it's poor Merriweather now, 'cause I ain' got my girls nor my house nor nothin' no more. That's why I got to get a stake again."

"Where'd it go?" Jim asked.

"Oh, one of them tomatoes, she went plain wild an' taken after me with a revolver, man, she was ablazin'—" Merriweather grinned broadly, remembering—"an' I was runnin'. She was bang, bang, bangin', and sonofabitch, she finally got lucky."

"Hit you?"

Merriweather pulled up his shirt and showed the bullet scar, pale white on his abdomen.

"Taken a bit of my liver, boy. Ruined me ever whichaway. So here I am out in the middle of a fucking nowhere buildin' up a new stake fo' winter." He brooded gloomily over the long landscape and spit at the little smoke again. "We won't be goin' in, Jim, till I hit a couple grand. You let me know when we hit a pair of G's and this fire'll prob'ly go out."

One gentle afternoon Bear paused by Jim to look over the blackened landscape and the enormous sky.

"My family, they was living on that river. The Kuskokwim."

"Where are they now?" Jim asked.

"Oh, they're still there. In my cabin. I got a wife and three kids. I got to make a big stake. It takes a lot to keep a family like that going."

"Sure."

"I'm goin' to need money to get them through the winter. I may be just a dirty Siwash, but I don't want my kids goin' hungry. I tell you, it ain't no fun goin' hungry up here in winter."

"Nowhere, really," Jim said, "not even Kokovoko. . . ."

"Worse up here. You don't eat, you get colder. Kids, they're worst."

"Why don't you hike over and see your family as long as we're so close?"

"Not that close. It's forty miles upriver. Have to fly up there. Bush pilot, he take me home. In winter, though, I can walk the river or drive dogsled."

"You know Nomi Mountain?"

"Sure. My cousin. Her family and us are neighbors. She was a good girl once."

"When?"

"No kidding, she could have been a nun or a schoolteacher," Billy said stubbornly, "but it was the soldierboys that ruined her, ruined my village. They had to go and put a little camp right next to our village. Same as Nomi's village —they come in, sometimes they build barracks, sometimes just big tents. They stay a while, then go away again. One time Nomi was twelve or thirteen, you know, I had caught her myself that summer out picking berries. I always do it that way." He grinned. "I go out with them berrypicking and I'm always grabbing at the girls and teasing them, and they're always screamin', 'Oh Billy, leave me alone!' And then one day I just grab 'em and everybody's used to them screamin' silly by then, and all of a sudden, you know, they're lookin' up at me and not squealin' no more, they're saying, 'Oh Billy, I do it because I love you.' "

Billy broke out into a long cackle of appreciation.

"And I got Nomi that way too once, when she was a girl. But what I'm talking about is this big black soldier was in the camp with a bunch of white soldiers. They got a bottle somewhere and they got Nomi drunk. It was in the fall, you know, and they was having a big party, and about ten of them white soldiers fucked Nomi on the riverbank whilst this big colored soldier was watchin', and then he said, 'Me too,' and he was just pantin' like a bull. She was so drunk she didn't care, so he tried it, but I be goddamned if he ain't built too big for her, and he just couldn't get it in noplace and it just ruined him. It just drove him wild, and them white troops was teasin' him and he was bellerin' and Nomi was even still willin', but he was just hung like a goddamned walrus and I be go to hell if he didn't just give up, and stand up, and jump up and down couple of times with his eyeballs arollin', and them white troops was laughin' like hell and teasin' him, and I be go to hell if he just didn't give a big howl and jump right in the river and he never came up either. A week later they pulled out what the fish had left. Them fish whittled his dingus down to size, I tell you. I seen him."

"Jesus Christ," Jim said sickly, picturing child Nomi under a line of soldiers, her drunker'n seven hundred dollars.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh," he groaned, and gritted his teeth, hating the lousy army, the cocksure Okies in it, the thoughtless, bestial, cowardly army, too afraid to camp away all by themselves.

"So, I don't like them spades," Billy said.

"Sometimes I think no one does," Jim said. "Wouldn't it be hell to be marked in such a way that no one would like you?"

The Eskimo, with his dark face, his straight black hair, his oriental eyes, laughed.

Then there was the missionary, the colorless, buck-toothed, pale-eyed Hank. One day, as if by inspiration, when there were several men close by, Billy said, "I know where that Marthy is."

"Where is she?" Beane asked, knowing Marthy by reputation.

"Marthy's down at the Pedro, drunker'n shit."

Hank looked up, licked his pale lips, his little, colorless eyes twitching.

"Hank thinks she's got religion," Billy played for his little audience. "Hank, he went and married our Marthy and I'll shit a rainbow he thinks she's got his religion too, but no more. I know."

Another half-breed from Steadman's camp, Joe Stork, threw in his barb. "Now, Billy, you know the Sonofgod saved Marthy from sin."

"Sure," Billy said. "He saved her when he had the key to the door and he could give her fifty cents a day for groceries."

"A little prayer wouldn't hurt you, Billy," Hank said.

"A little piece of her ass wouldn't hurt neither," Billy said, and he added with a sly, knifing look, "Who's givin' her fifty cents a day now, Sonofgod?"

"Someone will see that she's taken care of and out of harm's way."

"Someone will shit!" Billy snorted. "I know who'll take care of her first. First off, it'll be Ernie the bartender, he'll take her over the road."

And gradually Jim understood that Hank, for himself, by himself, and unto himself, had sought to save a drunken klooch named Marthy and he had gone the whole route by marrying the free whore, the staggering, blind-drunk playgirl, another Nomi actually, only shorter and fatter; and in truth, this midwestern Baptist had gone the two miles, had given her his cloak and his name, had given her house and home and furniture, heat and groceries, and all she had to do was stay sober, be faithful, pray, and be somewhat grateful probably.

It was the marriage that insulted Billy, who was a Catholic and who knew Marthy was too, though he never mentioned it, not wanting to ruin a good touch for her. He resented a marriage which was supposed to be a salvation for a native, and which, to his mind, was slavery, and this insult to his race was now, after two weeks, too much for him to take.

The other men, not knowing her or Hank at all, took up the laughing refrain, "Where's Marthy?" From across the tundra as they lazily carried cans of water or picked at little, smoky patches of moss could be heard the cheerful password, "Where's Marthy?" and if Billy was close by, he'd laugh like a wild ape. They could all picture a dirty, drunken, chubby native slut blindly reeling toward a lamppost with her shirt out and her pants undone.

After a couple of days, Hank finally sought out Jim, who could only pass him on to Blake.

"I got to get home," Hank said with a colorless tone. "My wife has no money for food."

Blake suggested somebody would give her credit on his check.

"Don't want anybody givin' her credit," Hank said. "I got to take her money myself. I got to get the plane out."

"The plane won't land, you know," Blake said gravely and sympathetically. "He won't land for one guy unless it's an emergency, and even then I don't think there's a place to set down for ten miles."

"I'll walk all the way if I have to," Hank said. "Can I go?"

"No," Blake said. "You'd get lost in an hour. It's no country for cross-country hiking."

"I could make it. I've got to," Hank said, showing a small chill of nervousness now. "I never figured to be gone so long from her."

Billy Bear was listening nearby. It seemed he was touched by the scene, though he had set it up all by himself.

"I can guide the Sonofgod," he said, "I'll guide him to the lake."

"Can you?" Blake asked doubtfully.

"Sure, I never been lost in my life."

"I'll loan you my compass," Blake said.

"That's my compass," Bear spoke dramatically, pointing at the sun which hardly set at all any more.

"Would you please, Billy?" Hank asked with wondrous gratitude.

"Nothing to it. I'll get you there in no time."

"The plane'll be in tomorrow morning," Blake agreed. "You can get started now and I'll tell Filson on the walkie-talkie where you are. If you want to leave Hank there and come back tonight, you can."

"Sure," Billy said. "The Sonofgod can stay by himself for one night out there. Give me your pack, Hank."

"I can carry it," Hank said.

But Billy grabbed the pack and said, "I'll carry it," and grandly swung it onto his broad, stubby back. He was a picture of self-sufficiency and strength. Sighting up at the sun, he heard Blake say, "It's exactly due west, roughly ten, twelve miles."

"Easy. Come on, Sonofgod." Billy watched the sun which, so far as Jim was concerned, was the most inconstant guidepost he'd ever seen, since it seemed to go around in a long loop rather than in a line from horizon to horizon.

And it was so. Having to bypass a bog, Billy and Hank cut up over a ridge, disappeared from camp, and then disappeared altogether.

Next day when Filson flew over, Blake informed him of the rendezvous. Filson flew around the lake. No one there.

"They're lost," he radioed back. "I'm low on gas. I'll come out tomorrow maybe."

"They won't starve," Blake replied. "They've got C-rations."

"Then I'll be back in three days," Filson said. He didn't want to fool around trying to hunt out a pair of jerks in that enormous landscape.

But as he flew back over the mountains, they in camp knew that two of their people were lost.

Blake's usual urbanity was slipping. "How could Bear miss that lake? He must be losing his touch."

They kept a smoky fire going as a beacon if it were needed; and the day Filson was due back, Bear and Hank staggered out of the spruce forest—or rather, to be correct, it was the pale, blue-eyed Hank who was carrying the pack and leading the way. No one remarked on it.

Only once in a while after that, Marthy having been forgotten, and Hank having hiked it alone to the lake, once in a while one of the crew would suddenly look at the sun in apparent amazement, would stand, point his finger and declare, "There's my compass!" and collapse in hacking, cackling laughter.

Then there was Beane. One night Beane cornered Merriweather, who was loafing no more or less than anyone else, but who at least seemed smaller and was openly sitting on his duff, drowsily watching the fire, separated enough from the others to leave him vulnerable.

"Whyn't you get busy?" Beane said.

Merriweather slowly looked at him with liquid hatred and said, "Shee-it on you."

"I know your kind!" Beane yelled.

Nobody could really be so stupid or unbalanced and still be allowed in the company of men, but Beane managed to blast in on his supreme ego. Everyone was sick of hearing about his father the Judge and his grandfather the Judge, and rather forlornly, everyone realized that Beane, too, would be a Judge, a neurotic, nearly insane, inept, venal, corrupt and petty human being set up by a political process to judge his betters. Everyone had heard that sad fact from Beane the first day.

"You're the kind that sneak around at night, that steal, that won't work like a real American. Won't study. Won't vote. And we give you a good job and you just drink it up, go on welfare, and crowd the jails from peddling dope."

Merriweather stood, hefted a shovel and moved silently, close on Beane.

"You are full of shit, Judge. Now you better just shut up your damnfool fucking trap before I plain shut it up for you."

Merriweather's voice rose as if he were blasting for a high note on a trumpet.

But Beane, of course, was too ignorant, too totally inadequate to be still, to learn or heed.

"You can't talk that way to *me!* You've got to work like everyone else. We're not carrying the freeloaders on our backs out here!"

They waited for a decision; the white and native and colored firefighters waited, knowing, until Merriweather threw the shovel away, shifted his small body and crossed a short mule-kick right to the face of the young judge. Then the collective body moved. Some caught the sagging kid, the rest swarmed over Merriweather. What was done was what they wanted done, but they wanted no more.

They knew better than most that justice would have to be taken out in anarchistic resistance against law, and lawyers, cops, organized professional parasitical verbalists, who excused the mockery by saying, "Somebody's got to do it. Somebody's got to make everyone else behave."

Beane was ostracized for a time. No one would speak with him, no one would share camp with him, and he retreated into his sullen shell, knowing he couldn't be wrong because his father was not wrong, his grandfather was not wrong, and the Beanes would overcome.

Yet one of the most curious facts of Billy Bear's nature was his willingness to go against every tide and instinct, and as he had sheltered the Sonofgod against the insults of the mob which he himself had lighted off, he similarly took in the despised Beane. He helped him build shelter, he shared out his rations with him, and he spoke cheerfully to him.

As far as Jim was concerned, he could do without the fanatics, but somehow Bear liked to or had to rescue them when they were on his ground. Would they do the same for him?

8

ANYUK

Jim was getting confused by this time. How many days or weeks had passed? He had thought the first day would be the last, then Steadman's bunch had kicked off the fire again, and after a time it seemed that it could sweep, swirl, curl, burn another mile at will. The original camp was God knows how many miles back, and still the flame would find a hidden finger to course out upon the tundra and sail across at the speed of the wind itself, though the actual damage was negligible.

What destruction hour by hour was going on in Fairbanks? What souls burned in the ditches, kneeled in the piss cans for a dollar, giggled under the gangling dogfaces, and all the roots breaking loose?

The pointlessness of their still being out there was obvious.

Certainly, if there had been five men of the entire twenty-four with the energy and honesty of Blake, the fire would have been put out the first night.

In spite of the hovering heat of the sun, in spite of the different parks and hills, a new camp every day, a different bed and perhaps a sudden relief from the horsefly, there was still a growing monotony. For a while, Jim had lifted their hearts with a printed sign which at every shift was changed. It said (——) hours (——) dollars as of (——). The numbers in the blanks increased with every second; he made it so. He carefully drove home the connection of money and time, until they were all saturated and aglow with the dream number of two thousand dollars. But as each day went by, there were more ready to compromise for less, to simply gang up, piss on the smokes, light no more and go home.

Jim himself, in that enormous all-sun world, had lost touch with all his touch. He had no idea where or when he was. He wrote new numbers down on every pay card, he changed the sign every four hours, but what was essential? Where were the people he loved and lived to love?

Frieda, the babe, Joe and Kitty, Nomi, Marthy, the cobbler, Mary and Grace. . . . Time had lost them, or space. . . . They had become less real than a can of hamburger patties and gravy, a cracker, a piece of gum.

Why didn't Hank bring Marthy back to her village where there is no temptation?

"Because," Bear answered, "she wouldn't go back. She don't feel at home no more."

What about Nomi, Jim? Where is she? What is she doing? What is dark Circe suffering now?

Perhaps the biggest success of Jim's entire career turned upon the advice of the cobbler.

In time their shelters had become clustered closely around a central area where a single common fire burned to heat their C-rations and warm them in the dark, but the rations were completely without savor. Only one good item was left, the traditional hamburger patties and gravy, now worth four ham and lima beans or three beef and peas. If anyone had ever mocked hamburger patties and gravy, the entire crew would have starved to death as a Mennonite community would starve without God.

Filson considerately dropped a big old aluminum kettle, battered and crusted, which represented a miracle from heaven to Blake. He had the genius to realize that a blending of the various cans of food would make a varying flavor, so that if you mixed chicken-with-noodle with ham and lima beans, it would taste different. Which was not really saying much. They ate from the same green cans; they shit the same green shit.

Until, searching through his shirt for a piece of gum, Jim came across the second miracle: the cobbler's blessing. The bottle of garlic salt, long forgotten, now appeared as important as the discovery of fire.

Jim studied it vacantly. A wise look, which he tried to conceal, slowly appeared on his face. As the day shift returned to camp he announced that it was his turn to cook. The rest of the men growled and glared at him, since of them all Jim was the worst possible chef. Even Beane could cook better. Jim might be very good at provoking a laugh, at singing screwball songs, at doing a ballet through the spruce, but tonight they were quarrelsome and sick of each other.

"Just give me the cans, boys, the old Frenchman is slinging the hash tonight! You fifty-dollar-a-day tycoons are going to get a real banquet!"

Jim made a big scene of spitting gobs of insufferably and agonizingly hawked-up spit and phlegm on his hands, rubbing them together zealously, then dragging them under his bony crotch, polishing the filthy fingernails, then reaching into his pocket for the midget can opener. And, as if discovering the Rosetta Stone, he declared, "Ah! Thees eez the secret of cookery—thees leetle moothair-fookaire, thees American couchevous peess cocks. . . ."

And negligent of his stage routine, the men lay down on their torn sleeping bags, or sat and stared at the campfire.

Jim opened the dozen cans, mixed them together however they came, and measured out about a teaspoon full of the garlic salt into the big kettle.

"Now, heroic smoke eaters! I shall peess in thees pot to geev eet that rare, exotic, truly French Flavor, and then we shall eat with great gusto—*Mais oui, manger les oiseaux!* Ah, indeed, *et puis, et puis encore. . . .*"

He set the kettle on the fire. As it started to steam, he said, "Today, boys, I found the rich droppings of a skunk! Very fresh!"

He dribbled a can of thick, greasy water, like rare and precious skunk shit, in the kettle. He sniffed the bubbling pot. "Delicious!"

By now the men were slightly interested.

"*Voilà!* Come along, you raging beasts, and try this."

They formed a loose, almost reluctant line, filled old cans with birch spoons, and slumped back into their habitual spots again, ignoring him.

"Eh, eh," Jim said. "These fifty-dollar-a-day connoisseur gourmets! Who else in this entire continent gets fresh skunk dung for an entrée?"

And then Bear said, "Jesus Christ—that's *good!*"

And in a second the rest had tasted and delivered their salute. "Man, that mess is a pisscutter!" "Holy moses, I get to fuck Jim tonight." "No, it's my turn, he's mine."

"Eh?" Jim stuck his chin out craftily. "You pigs, I wouldn't let my little poodle dog fuck you."

He was secretly delighted and he even ate a few bites himself. The kettle was cleaned for the first time.

"Howja do it?"

"First you catch a skunk shitting," Jim said.

They were suddenly a happy, friendly outfit. They sang barbershop harmony into the Arctic night; they reached far into their memories for jokes; they agreed to all go for a swim in the first dawn light. All they needed, Beane calculated, was another week to make the two thousand.

"Why not three?" Jim asked.

"Too much," Steadman said. "They'll let it go first."

"So be it," Jim said. "Another week, two grand. In the bag."

And knowing it was his last week in the Arctic, near the Kuskokwim, somewhere near Porcupine Creek and Anyuk, Jim arrived at a small, obviously false plot. Blake was sick of seeing twenty-two men coaxing smoke out of the tundra on a twenty-four hour shift. He didn't need money nor experience at marking time; he loved movement, the dynamic of the Arctic. Not a bird or animal went by but what he wouldn't chase it a few steps for his own bag of experience. So when Jim said, shortly after Filson had dropped another load of C-rations, "I think I saw a smoke in the east, a tall one over the ridge," and patiently spinning out a long story, explicit in its detail of direction, strength, color, degree and urgency, he persuaded Blake to let him and Jim and Billy Bear check up on it.

After all, their own fire had gradually been worked down into nothing more than one small belching char in some deep, matted moss, into which everyone who sat around the circle, supposedly putting it out, threw their cigarette butts. There was no other fire, only this tiny puff of smoke whisking up through a clump of damp moss, which no one would dare extinguish until the week was gone and the two thousand dollars complete.

"I can't spare you, Jim," Blake grinned. "You're the only one who has the secret of cooking this crap."

Jim hated to lose the secret of his culinary magic, but he could not resist his destiny either. He traded. Beane took the nearly empty bottle of garlic salt contemptuously.

"I knew it wasn't anything," he said.

"Don't be stupid all your life," Jim said. "Make some chatter and put some in the pot. A big boy like you can do that."

Then they were clear of camp, with no one really giving a good goddamn what they did or where they went, except perhaps for Beane, who snickered something about our three boys going out for a lark.

It was boundless country, twice the size of Texas, and there was no need of a single trail. A grand morning to be loose, carrying a light, simple pack, with two of the best guides anywhere and going somewhere besides to a fire.

They had hardly gotten clear of the charred area when Bear announced they should get clean. Producing three little bars of soap at a deep, clear pool, it took little persuasion for them to jump in, clothes and all.

Jim was bubbling over with the joy of freedom. No boss, no Sonofgod, no fire, no time slips, no coaxing out extra hours from nowhere into time here.

Coming out of the pond, they wrung the water from their ragged clothes, which would never be really clean, and lay in the warm sun for a few minutes, until the horseflies and mosquitoes found them. Then hurriedly they dressed, lacing their boots and shoes with many-knotted strings, while Bear indicated the general direction of his home town.

The forest was green and shimmering with golden syrupy light, the white of the birch was as pure as washed flax, the dark substance of the spruce glistened like pitchblende lacquer, and the moss was springy under their feet. The streams and lakes were splendid cobalt, reflecting the sky's deep-piled clouds. Ptarmigan flushed out ahead of them and ducks flew. A fox with his red summer pelt alive dashed across a meadow before their eyes, heavy deep moose tracks crossed their path, and splayfooted hook-clawed bear prints marked the land. Their strides were long and easy. Blake's laughter was full and real, Bear's broken-toothed grin was spreading, and Jim's elation at cutting adrift was near intoxication. Until, as they crossed a golden green park in the sweet afternoon, a terror-stricken scream shattered the peace and gloss of the day. It was such a horrible, shocking cry that Jim felt like simply running from the sound, but he stopped still. He felt a sick panic, though Blake and Bear were driving on as if they hadn't even heard it. Jim wondered if he had suddenly gone over the edge. Surely they had heard it too.

"Hey! he called. "Wait!"

They looked back at him, ready to help if he needed help.

" 'S matter, Jim?" Blake asked, coming back to him.

"Didn't you hear that godawful scream?"

It tore out of the woods again like a bloody dying battle-cry of maimed death. It was a long, pulsating, harsh, dismal shriek.

"Someone's dying," Jim said positively, starting to run toward the screen of trees.

"It's a loon, just a loon, Jim," Blake said.

"Loon?" Jim stopped abruptly. "Damn it, it sounds human."

Bear joined them. "Let's sneak up on her. She is a funny bird, crazy, you know. There is a story—" he murmured, as they moved through the trees and another rackety, saw-edged scream ripped out into the still blue sky again, sending shivers up Jim's back. "She was bad, you know. She loved her brother, and he didn't know, so she got him drunk or something and he fucked her, see, and he didn't know he shouldn't, but then the old folks found out and told him, and as she was trying to get him drunk again and licking his ear with her tongue, he bit at her throat to kill her, but she had a neck so tough his teeth couldn't get through. He just tore a chunk of feathers and skin out of her throat, and the story goes on that she killed him her brother, because he wouldn't fuck her no more and had bit her, so now she wears a black dress and has gone nuts and the mark of his teeth is in her throat even now, and her crazy screams are so bad because he pinched her windpipe when he bit her just before she killed him."

Bear was quite serious and solemn, maybe a little ashamed of the simplicity of his tale.

Blake and Jim nodded, and Bear added, "That means, you see, that you didn't break the rules of the old folks. That's how we learn. We hear the loon and see the red mark on her black throat, and we know how it happened, so it's a good way to teach kids, you see."

They continued on into the dark forest from which the screams had come.

Jim was trying to remember. Yes, the cobbler, old Mr. K——, he had said something about loons, but Jim couldn't recall, only that it was important to beware of the loon.

Suddenly Billy slowed, raised his arm for silence, and the other two came around him to look. It was a lovely, mirror-topped, oxbow lake, surrounded by deep, dense spruce, and near the shore, swimming like any waterbird were two black, long-necked birds, fishers. They had red-splotched throats, as if fire burned at their black plumage. They were graceful as mallards. They were at peace, at home, and yet the brightness of their eyes, the nervous briskness of their movements belied peace or harmony, and suddenly the neck of one of them swelled and the bestial scream of terror somehow hooked out of her throat.

Bear's eyes became angry, his face grim. He threw a stick at the swimming birds, and as the stick dropped close he said crossly, "Dive, you black whores!" and the swimming birds, in quick fear, suddenly disappeared beneath the unrippled surface of the lake.

"I hate 'em," Bear said, almost to himself. *"Tu-e'-luk,"* he named the bird in his language, a name sounding like the dismal cry of the loonwoman herself.

O that was she, surely. It was the loonwoman, Nomi, or Ruthie or Marthy; they were all gasping, gagging loonwomen haunting the world of all who had ears to hear.

And another flew overhead, two in fact, coming over silent and swift like black arrows, so it was hard to know if they were real, or only the emissaries of an abstract Satan, two black darts flickering by the inner eye. Two of the lost and damned, not given an honest choice.

"They're a revolting, tragic bird," Jim said.

"How come?" Bear asked, uncaring.

"Any bird that flies and that is also repulsive is a most tragic creature, abandoned by its maker in mid-creation," Jim said aloud, but to no one.

You would be surprised to know the Latin name for the species," Blake said, as they came out of the swampy glade into the sun. "It's Urinator. The red-throated is classified Urinator Lumme. There are others, the black-throated over on the coast, and a few Pacific Loon and another, the yellow-billed. Scarce, too."

"How could they put a name like that on any bird? Why a pissbird?"

"Why not? Maybe she pisses a lot," Bear said hatefully. "Let's move. I'd like to get to the village before full dark."

"It's changed the day," Jim said. "I hate that loon cry."

"Sure," Bear said, "I hate them black whores all the way."

And, by God, there was the river, called Porcupine Creek, which flowed into the Kuskokwim. They came close to the stream, and high above it, on a flat bank, was a trapper's cabin, built strongly, but empty.

Bear nodded to it. "Good. That is Aongalac's. We're not far."

They prowled curiously around the empty cabin, nailed tight against intruders. Its roof was of sod, laid on poles, its walls heavy spruce logs, its one window a small pane of glass which revealed a Yukon stove, a hewn table and some stools, two bunks built against the wall, and a crude cupboard. That was it. In the front yard were the bones and hair of long forgotten moose, and to one side perched a cache house high on poles. What remained of a winter sleigh, which had been glued together with frost itself, lay in pieces where it had fallen apart in the summer sun.

A sleigh in summer, a winter tool in summer, Jim thought, as he looked at the disjointed skeleton of the sleigh. Urinator. How could they call her Urinator?

"Nice place, huh?" Bear said, as they continued along a trail by the river bank. "Your friend Nomi stayed a winter here, trapping."

Jim said, "Somehow it figures."

"Her husband and baby."

"Bobbie? Bobbie Arblick?"

"I guess that's what they called the kid. Something like that. She was just a kid herself, but she worked that goddamn sonofabitch just the same. She teached him how to trap, and they go at it all winter, you know, and make good."

Jim didn't fill in the pause. He could guess what came next.

"But they took all that money to town, you know. And I guess they had a hell of a party. I heard they did."

"I've worked with John Arblick," Blake said.

"That's him. Boy, he didn't like it out here."

"No," Blake said. "He's more of an easy come than an easy go. Funny he married her."

"She had some money from her family," Bear said, "and she had good fishing rights and family traplines. That's how he got started up here. The only time he ever worked was that winter Nomi had him in that cabin."

Jim hurt to think of Arblick and Nomi sharing that cabin through a long winter, mushing down this trail with the dogs in harness, her face aglow with the blood and frost. Arblick no doubt riding free, planning the payoff come spring. To take her as a child, to pander to her childish delights and let her laugh her silly way down a road of death and misery, to abscond with her property and child, to spot the union as the elevator to the future, to spot Don Hennessey as the man to give him the boost, to do it all with apparently honest, democratic ideals and devotion. O god damn!

"Only some day," Jim groaned quietly, "some day someone will kill him."

"He'll never cut it," Blake said. "Too many people know him."

"But too many people owe their bread to him too. The labor boss is the new seigneur. Lord Arblick, may I work today? Please, dear kind sir, come and fuck my daughter, my son, my bony old dad, but please, Lord, let me get off the bench and out on a job. . . ."

"It ain't so bad," Bear said. "We got the land, the woods, the rivers. . . ."

And Blake, worried about Jim's state of mind, said, "Jim, in your fund of useless knowledge, you will now be told a revolutionary fact: this creek that flows into the Kuskokwim, also flows into the Yukon, and runs to the sea. Now did you know that the lowly Yukon River sprawling around—"

"Like a drunken Siwash," Bear said.

"—is the biggest river in the United States?"

"No kidding?" Jim asked.

"The Yukon puts out a third more water to the sea than the Mississippi. Imagine that. Here we are in a state twice as big as Texas with a river a third bigger than any other, so what else have they got?"

"We got it made here," Bear said. "Look at the salmon berries, look at the river."

The miles passed underfoot, miles along the flowing creek. Clear, cold and bounded by uncut wilderness.

The walls of spruce, the dells of birch, the steep banks of fine clay washed out by the hurrying summer river which would go under ice too soon. The beaver slap, the heavy goose warble on a fright, the plate-size bear tracks upon which they placed their own torn soles.

Then Anyuk dogs swarmed out and they were set back by the sudden bark and hell of yelling malemutes. Bear grabbed up a stick and cracked the snouts of the most inquisitive, the yellowest eyes. They yipped and slunk to the rear of the gang.

Some of these big, heavy-shouldered dogs with their flat skulls and fearsome jaws were touched by Nomi, perhaps she had whipped them into a winter team. She had run her broken hands over those heavy, curved tails, she had hacked at their snarling faces without fear and cursed them when they tried to run wild.

Was he afraid? The point was that he thought about it, whether he was or wasn't. Nomi hadn't considered, she had struck hard and fast in fury to bring the dozen dogs to trace and leather.

People appeared from the river bank, from out of a loose line of log cabins, shacks and simple barasties—thirty or forty people.

They were either children without clothing or older folks dressed in cotton work clothes. The short, round women wore a loose, flower-figured mother hubbard. Most of the men, bowlegged, bronze-faced, wore their pants stuck into their socks like knickers.

On the river was a crude dock made of a few driftwood logs, and a little beach upon which were drawn a couple of flatbottomed, square-sterned boats, equipped with outboard motors. Littering the beach were oil cans, gasoline barrels, oars and ropes.

The cabins were clustered to front upon the river. The best of them were solidly made of notched spruce logs, but when they were patched with packing-crate boards the effect was as of ulcers on a turtle.

The outhouses, caches and sheds were primarily made of these dismantled crates and were warped, twisted, split and junky. There was also a lot of scrap tin nailed up for quick protection on the roofs, and one log building was topped by a scrap-iron cross.

When the dogs were driven away by Bear and his relatives, there was simply the pandemonium of an isolated people being visited. Bear had not seen this village in years, but he was well remembered. They knew that his wife and children were doing all right up on the Stickeen River, another thirty miles away, and were glad to see him, and wanted to know how was everything in Fairbanks. Plenty of work?

Bear had no grandparents or parents in this village, but there were plenty of cousins and plenty of ladies he had loved well. For a while Bear was aglow with the attention and chatter, but it must have come to him that he had given this up. He would not ever be satisfied in a shack on a distant river, where the only contact with town was a bush pilot who might drop by once a month. That was all right for these people, because their lives were set, but he was a misfit. He was half-Arab and half-imitation Siwash, and it was not his fault.

"Come in and eat. Stay at my house tonight."

There was hospitality on every side. Obviously they were a well-knit, unhating and sharing group who had only to work, eat, and sleep, and their work was largely a pleasure.

"You want a woman?" Bear asked Blake and Jim, and they all three realized the irony, that they wanted a woman, all right, but not any of these ripe, rusty-faced beauties. He said, "Don't answer yet. There's time. They been givin' me the sign, you know, but better go slow, heh? Hey, buddies?" he yelled, as if to announce to everyone that he and his friends were actually, really friends, and that whatever he was any place else, he was as good as any and destined to be a high-class white boss.

They sat on stools outside among the dogs and flies, mosquitoes and no-see-ums. It was too hot to be inside a cabin. Pelts hung anywhere out of dog reach, random placed as if to hell with them, but Jim had the feeling they were not forgotten or neglected. They would make a boot or mitt for someone in the coming winter.

There were heaps of animal bone and hair lying about, and there were piles of cordwood being sawed by hand for the coming winter. Nets stretched here and there, poles were set up as racks to dry fish and caribou jerky.

They took off their boots and shoes to rub their well-worn feet, and ate of bits of smoked salmon and salted suet-tasting caribou, provided by they knew not whom, since it was donated by the village.

Bear had much to tell them. The fire they were working on, the conditions in Fairbanks, which were either circus carnival or paradise, the weather, the food, the fun. There was no gloom, no Arblick, no jail, no foreboding, no future.

A constant flow of giggling circled among them all.

Any one of them could as well be sitting in the Pedro, his head flopped limp on a bar, a puddle of vomit on the floor between his legs. Any one of them would be delighted to be jitterbugging in the dim dawn to the "Roses So Red" as sung by Buck Orneri. They loved to play, to smile, giggle, fool around, accomplish nothing except to make a merry, hand-to-mouth existence on nature's big cold toe. If there came the time of "the hunger" when the caribou turned aside from their ancient trails, or the seal somehow never appeared, or if the moose or bear or auklet or ptarmigan simply failed, when that time came—as it sometimes did in a generation—then there would be nothing to eat but the dogs, and the dogs having been eaten, nothing to eat except filth, until ultimately in the time of the mad hunger, some sinful women might go so far as to eat their young.

But now there were salmon and sheefish in the river, berries in the woods, and tea and sugar in the cupboards. Now it was very nice to be alive. And why worry about storing up grain for some snowy dark and starving day that might come? After all, such sad days might not come at all. Now one could love a warm gold and green growing day, a full belly, and a lot of kids and pups.

Where was Nomi? Oh, yes, yes, she was gone to Fairbanks. She was having some trouble with a man, they guessed she would be back some day, or they would all go to Fairbanks where there were oil stoves and moving pictures and lots of crazy fun.

"Yes, I am Nomi's uncle. I was brother to her mother."

The old man spoke haltingly, his voice high-pitched, his features sharp and tough. He spoke as if in the grip of stage-fright, and after making such a great effort, he smiled and said no more, having said all that could be said.

What else was there to say? Would she live in a log cabin two days walk from the nearest radio, which could call out a bush pilot on emergency, two days walk to a school, two days walk to a trading post, where the radio and school were?

Suddenly another old ochre-faced uncle, almost stuttering, and looking far away to Mount McKinley perhaps, got out the sentence, "I am Christian, you know?"

Then he looked even farther away at his sinew-mended work shoes, shuffling harshly in the dust. That was all a man could reveal, the ultimate for him. He had nothing to add unless Jim should say, I am Christian too, brother, then the other might ask, You know hymns? and Jim could go through a song-and-dance routine of "Little Brown Church in the Wild Wood."

And not only was the radio and the school in the trading store two days down the mighty river, but also the preacher or priest was there, too, at the mission school. Yes, Jim remembered, the nuns with their switches educating the little dark-eyed girls. He couldn't remember the name of the place, Fort Selkirk or something like that, and he could not speak either, since he could not say to the old man, I am a Christian too, brother.

Was Billy Bear, the half-Arab, a brother too? Or was he more Mohammedan than Christian, Copt or Jew? When he came stone blind, reeling drunk out of the city, what was he then, or what was he in the upper room swollen with Negro whores and wine bottles?

Something was very wrong somewhere. The corruption of a people so gracious and generous, so modest and valuable, so strong and sentimental, that corruption was a weight for someone to carry on his eternal back. It had to be paid somehow. Someone was a Christian; very well, someone had to pay. But who? The Arblicks? The Joes? The Ernies? The Orneris? The Yoni Heavenlis? Or was it himself? The one and only sorrower: Jim Carondelet.

The bones were heaped high and dirty chunks of flesh were dragged about by scuffling, snarling dogs. Old remnants of caribou and walrus and fish blended a heavy, ripe stink into the smoky air.

Billy was disappointed that none of his friends were about, and there were no young women either. It seemed the Indian Bureau had a new education program for them in town. They were taken from the villages and would not be back. They would be set loose on Second Avenue, and goodbye, good luck, the problem's solved.

There were a few ten- or eleven-year-olds standing around curiously, but beautiful as they were, slim, unformed, dark and gorgeous-eyed, they were not yet ready for male capture or bureaucratic destruction.

There were children of all ages appearing from their havens of play, coming to stand and gawk at the strange visitors. Protected from the mosquitoes and flies with either dirty pieces of cloth or plain dirt, they still presented a purity, an urchin beauty. And these kids, dirty as they were, fly-bitten and unshorn, were enjoying themselves. There was no crying.

Heavy-breasted, valley-eyed, new mothers bore their babies alternately from their backs to their flowing milk.

There was much disorder and filth, but through it all ran an open, organic structure from birth to death, and with those problems taken care of, the people could laugh, could be modest and generous, could be free.

Jim remembered Nomi's explanation for this worryless freedom: "The only thing we're ashamed of is doing something secret, you know? Say, if a man loves a dog in heat, you know, say he just has to fuck this dog in heat, say there's nothing else around and he's got to fuck something and he fucks the dog. Yes, he does, and it is all right with everyone, it is just taken for granted, as like if he had to spit; but the point is, he's got to fuck that dog out on the wide open ice in front of whoever just happens to be going by. And if somebody happens to be going by, they don't just stand around and look because, besides not being polite, it isn't interesting either, you see. Somebody going by sees this bony, bird-legged fellow with the terrible corkscrew hard-on and thinks to himself, well, Jim has got to fuck the dog, and goes on his way, maybe thinking, 'Well, I don't like to fuck dogs any more than Jim does, but sometimes a man must fuck something.' It could be a fresh-killed polar bear, it could be a knothole, or about anything, so long as he does it out in the open. So it is no secret. No secret, no sin."

I speak a thousand hypocrisies a day, Jim thought, and how many secret lies and acts of hate in secret?

The resinous smoke from the spruce knots choked off the gnats and mosquitoes somewhat and they were treated to a supper of well-aged caribou, which was about as high as Jim could go without throwing up, but he kept his mind on old cheeses and was able to smile and enjoy the smoky flavor of the dry flesh. He was served by a middle-aged, fat woman, whose teeth alternated with gaps, and whose bushy, heavy head of hair nearly obscured her face. She seemed taken by Jim's ascetic, starved features and her eyes shone. He knew, and thought to himself, I should just lie down with her by the fire here in the open, undress her and my own bones, and let nature take its course before the uninterested eyes of the village.

Blond Eli Blake was so stalwart, so obviously undefiled, so brisk in his speech and good humor that no woman seemed to want him. Bear had picked another tired old girl who could still smile and practice a feminine coquettishness, and, in fact, without finishing supper, he and she wandered off to pick berries.

My name is. . . . Oh, God, what could be the name of the dirty, gap-toothed, paunchy savage who was the most unsexy woman he'd ever come close to, but yet was a representation of the eternal strange woman. She was the target, he the arrow. He was thinking she would say, My name is Mimi, and make him cry, because he was coming unglued again. His nerve tissue was frog-jumping on a slide under a microscope. He was beginning to be one long, aching pang for the tragedy of whoever it was, Mimi, or Nomi, of this woman who had long since fulfilled herself but whose function of fulfillment was not yet exhausted. She came forward to do her simple duty which was to meet with a man, and Jim happened through some curious streak of luck to be somewhere near the west coast of Alaska, by a long creek in a tiny village where the people loved each other and shared what they had, so that not any of them was a pauper or a slave to another, and that included the functions of man and woman, too. My name is— He never heard it, he couldn't bear the thought of her having a name he ought to remember. He said, before she could finish, "What sort of berries are ripe now?"

"I show you, Jim." She smiled a great, fat, gap-toothed, happy smile.

O here's to the Esquimaux
Her nose is too pudgy to blaux. . . .

Walking closely and lovingly together through the moss and ferns, through alder and birch, he thought to himself: I have loved every woman who ever looked upon me with compassion. And he meant it, *every* being the key as well as the grindstone.

He always called her "Whatshername" after that. He always nearly wept when he thought of her sweetness beneath the rough mother hubbard, her rich giggle. He lay the night with her on a pile of skins in a brush shelter which kept the dogs out and most of the mosquitoes. Bear was off somewhere, Blake was yakking with a few of the elders, inquiring about the mechanics of trapping, hunting, fishing. He was the true ethnologist.

She was a strong-smelling, heavy-moving, crinkly-eyed woman and she carved his memory so he would never be able to forget her. He could be another of the haunted and damned gold seekers, if he ever went for the full money hunt. But he had not committed himself to any one job, any one person except Nomi, and that was not yet settled. This heavy, naked, monolithic, great-assed, giggling woman could as well have been Nomi's mother, or her aunt, or even an older sister, certainly at least a cousin.

In the morning after Whatshername had brought him a bowl of mush and blueberries for breakfast, an old man with great casualness asked him, "You know Mr. K——? He is in Fairbanks now."

"Does he fix shoes?" Jim asked.

"Ah, ah, ah." The old, sharp-nosed man grinned burningly. "Yes, that is him, Mr. K——. He is old friend to us, you know. He is missionary here many, many long time ago. He make Presbyterian mission down the river. He teach kids, you know. He made many Christians, teach songs, he learn Eskimo talk and make his songs into Eskimo so we can sing. Yes, yes, he is our friend."

"A very strange man," Jim observed. "He fixed this shoe."

"Very nice. He like us. We like him, very sorry to see him leave, but he had to go."

"Why did he have to go?"

"Why? Why? He just had to," the old man said, looking off to the skyline. "He could not stay any more. He would try to work here and hunt and fish with us, and suddenly he would start to cry. He would cry like a sick woman, he would cry like a crazy bear," the old man laughed. "Something he couldn't ever figure out, you know. All was well, maybe no one sick, no one sad, but maybe just nothing, maybe some soldiers come through and we have a big party and he would all of a sudden get so sad he would go crazy and go hug a tree to keep from fighting someone. Oh, very sad, but he was so good all year around. Winter, he was very brave and best hunter, big potlatch, gave all away, and ate little himself."

"This isn't true," Jim said with terror.

"He saved us once from typhoid fever. Then again when the great hunger came, he made trip across ice to Barrow and brought back food for us people. He could sew up the clawing of a bear, and he could bring out baby. Oh, he teach and doctor, he Christianed us and pull teeth, and give turnip seeds and wash floors, ho ho ho, he was a crazy good feller, he was, yes."

"He's still in Fairbanks," Jim said. "He is not crying now, maybe."

"Well you tell him we are still coming along," the old man with the face of flint and walrus hide said.

"I'll tell him."

"You tell him old Sam Mountain Wholecheese asks him to visit us back, please."

Whatshername had disappeared. She was down at the water's edge splitting salmon coming off the fish wheel and hanging them on spruce pole frames, their red flesh like flames on the dark riverbank. She ignored him; she had the harvest to do for the coming winter. If he stayed, she would sleep with him again; if not, she would remember and giggle and tease the others with stories of the birdlegged white man's touch of love.

Blake had amassed more lore which he would store for a snowy day, would perhaps use in an educational work if he lived long enough. But now, at least, he, who was probably the most informed and vital and inspired white man in that enormous area, was still, Eskimo-like, concerned only with a minute-by-minute enjoyment of the countryside. He knew it all, there was no doubt, but he didn't know how, or didn't want to know how, to exploit his knowledge. Something in Blake had made him suspicious of that sort of generosity, and perhaps he decided that the better part of generosity is to withhold the truth.

Later in the morning, bearing a couple of dried salmon for their journey back, Jim and Blake and Bear waved at the group of short-legged natives who were studiously ignoring them and going about their business, because farewells were too easily moments of shame, and Jim gave a wave to Whatshername, who didn't look up, nodded smiling to old Sam Wholecheese, and followed Bear down the path.

Bear walked straight and robust. He was a man in his own nation. Blake, taller, heavier, bore too along the trail with a supreme lightness and agility which marked him as an outdoorsman, dedicated to an understanding of this disappearing wilderness. There were rumors afloat, although Blake did little to confirm or deny them, that he was a scion of a multimillionaire, blueblood family. But Blake always behaved in a positive and almost irrational fashion which made direct questions to him seem either unnecessary or impolite. Blake was a rogue male, a man with every advantage of money and position, leverage and education, natural brilliance, and a logger's physique, but who would not accept these gifts. On his own terms he could make a good living simply by fighting fire, trapping, carpentering, moving about. The pictures he took, hundreds of them, were always available to anyone, free for nothing. He did not expect or want to devour this land, he only wanted to give himself body and soul to it.

He was not alone. Every male who was ever touched, except perhaps the soldiers who were forced into it against their wish, was touched by the raw purity and the challenge; and knowing that the challenge was to be found nowhere else, stayed with it or left it—and were haunted the rest of their lives by the memory of the overwhelming life they'd rejected for a soft padded security that was dry as dust in the mouth. O how the heart's blood roared in the Arctic! O those were the days! A man was alive then; he was a man standing on his two hind legs then!

How many Bostonian scions had seen it? Astor? Certainly the Russian Promyshlenniki had seen it, had named the native girls "Klooch," had worked the people and died. The French *voyageur* had canoed and drowned along the river; the Finn and Swede had looked through and perished in the forest. The Irish and Iowa sourdoughs had prospected the sandbars of the river, and all had died.

"They ain't much," Bear grunted. "They ain't gettin' anywhere, but it's their business. They ain't in jail. It's a hell of a life just the same. They don't know anything. A Russian, a Chinese soldier invade us, they wouldn't even know what to do."

Jim made a guess. They would feed the soldier, a woman would come to him, or several, and they would see that he was as content as they could make him. Certainly they would conquer him by their poverty and innocence and generosity.

In the distance was pale smoke. In the foreground was the Arctic willow, piles of moss absorbing fallen timber, and above the sky was a tremendous bowl of thin blue glass. The sky was of a tincture he would never see again, a brilliant aquamarine crystal, a sharpness, and an infinite, overcoming horizon.

They paused beside another small stream, which fed into the Kuskokwim, and nibbled at the smoked salmon. Then they rested, Bear sleeping and Jim loafing against a spruce tree, absorbed and etching into his memory this day and all such days. Blake restlessly prowled the creek bed. He never stopped. He hardly ever slept. Jim remarked he was the most hoggish repository of the whole country. And now with a dish of birch bark, Blake was scraping and washing the sand and gravel of the creek bank. In an hour he had a thimble of birchbark half full of gold. He was grinning his All-American toothpaste smile, but he was not excited.

Bear woke up and looked uninterestedly at the gold dust and grunted as if it were easy. But Jim was really excited. The prospect of discovering the riches of the north was a terrible temptation. He himself scratched and panned the sandbar and picked out the little flakes of gold. His mind was busy on how to keep the discovery secret. In a few minutes he realized they would have to liquidate Bear, who was too unreliable. Jim's eyes were glistening bright. Ah now, here was Alaska. The Pedro bonanza, the Comstock Lode, the Homestake, the Klondike, all over again.

He changed his position so that his back was not exposed to his partners. He was thinking how easy it would be after they had disposed of Bear for him to take care of Blake as well. That Blake—he had no money sense at all! He'd probably give it all away to the natives. The rich motherfucking sonofabitch.

And Jim—well, Jesus, he had a wife and child practically on relief, and shouldn't they get some benefit from this? Like a new house, a new car, a lot of insurance and annuities, and clothes and gardeners and footmen—and things like that? After all, he had risked a lot and to the brave goes the loot. So if even Blake said he was the one who had found it, it would be just his word against Jim's, and anyway, obviously, they were all partners, and so it was all Jim's.

Jesus Christ, it was gold! A whole hell of a continent twice as big as Texas full of it. Well hurray! Save Nomi! Save Bear! Save Blake! Save Jim!

But his fever dropped to normal when Blake said, "You can find some of this in about any creek around."

"What are we waiting for? It's here," Jim replied.

"Not enough," Blake said. "Not enough to make wages. It's gold, but it's not worth it unless you want to gamble away a summer. And I've gambled them away on better colors than this creek has and come up with nothing but a good lesson."

"Sure," Bear said. "Let's get moving. That Filson, he gets mad sometimes, I don't want to be left out here in the middle of nowhere."

From the distance, Jim heard the mawkish scream of a loon, and to himself he said, tossing away his pinch powder of gold, *Sacre Saint Ciboire!* Here goes a murderer.

They left the golden bar, the deep-gouged creek and climbed up to the flat land again. Dead white spruce, blown down in some old gale, cluttered the trail and the going was a slow, sweating trek in the noonday heat. The sun beat at them from all sides, and the fallen forest slowed their progress like jackstraws would slow three ants.

A martin lifted out of his den and ran across the timber away.

"Is very good trapping in here," Bear said. "In winter the snow is over this shit, but not now. Lots of fur in here. Martin, fox, blueblack fox, ermine, even wolverine too. That skunk pissdog, I hate him." Billy showed his teeth in fury of remembering how much he and everyone else hated that wolverine for his contrariness.

They sweated and ripped their ragged clothes even more on this bad stretch of toppled trees, because it seemed a shortcut to the tiny bit of smoke on the horizon.

"I don't like that smoke," Bear said. "I think they let it get away while we was gone."

Blake nodded. He had already picked up the pace like a fire horse.

"Today is the day we wind it up." Jim felt a breeze cool the sweat on his back. The column of smoke leaned away from them.

"We better hustle." Blake started through the fallen logs like a long-distance hurdler, and Jim was forced to lift his stringy legs to keep anywhere near close.

Coming over the top of a steep hill the timber wreck ceased as suddenly as they had found it. A giant wind had fanned across the valley once, had blown an entire forest vale over, but had funneled on off in another direction and left the remainder to grow or burn.

From the hilltop they could see a great towering spout of smoke and off to the north were heavy, gray rain clouds.

It was a question of whether smoke or storm would cross the ridge first.

They hurried on, Blake leading, Bear second, Jim barely able to bring up the rear. It was hours, it seemed, until they finally could see flame under the smoke, while off to the north could be seen the blue broom of rain sweeping out the sky, and a ridge of heat lay between.

Jim's knees ached, his chest pained, and he had a digging in his side he didn't like. But he tried to keep up. After all he told himself, I'm the timekeeper. I'm essential.

And in another hour they had reached the camp, now empty. All hands were out pursuing the new fire.

They grabbed up shovels and Pulaskis and ran on across the old, dead burn they had so loved. And a half-hour more of the murderous pace brought them to new burn and old comrades slogging along, batting here and there at little clumps of cinders smoking. It looked the same as it had the month before, only their clothes were torn to rags and their beards were a month old. Their expressions were bleary. Blake continued until they found old Steadman leading the entire crew. He was sweated through, staggering and mad. He was red-eyed, singed and mortified.

But on seeing Blake, Bear and Jim, he stopped and for a moment smiled sickly. "Musta been a blowout. Just a spark," he said. "Somebody was chopping and a piece of spark must've blew out the line."

Jim knew it was a lie and that neither Filson nor anyone else would buy it. "By God!" Jim yelled, staring at the sky, "I don't think so. I saw that lightning strike. We had it licked when the damned lightning hit and fired it up again. I saw it exactly—damned thing blinded me for a second but I'm here to swear it was a lightning strike."

So said, it suddenly was truth. The thunder over the ridge rumbled. Thunder was lightning, and lightning could well be understood by any paperpusher at headquarters.

Steadman, stunned and tired, missed the point until Bear said, "Sure, we seen it strike. A hell of a flash right into dead timber."

And Steadman said, "Well, thank heaven, because I was asleep at the time and I thought one of those jerks had set it loose again. . . ."

And nothing more was said.

They whacked away at the fireline until great, boiling, blue-black clouds of ice rain swirled over the ridge and wet down the whole thing, lightning strike and all. The fire was out. All of it. They had done double duty, having put out two fires for the price of one. Jim made sure they all got twenty-four hours that day.

In the morning when Filson flew over on schedule, the men were waiting, sodden with freezing rain under their makeshift barasties, but there was no smoke could live through that rain, and Filson was satisfied they had done their best and waggled his wings in approval. He spoke over the walkie-talkie to the eager-faced Blake. "O.K., kiddo, bring them due east about a mile, and I'll start ferrying back. Looks like you earned your pay."

Blake led the way and twenty-two men followed. Poor Sonofgod had left too early. Perhaps he had saved the soul of a stupid, gap-toothed klooch, his wife, but he'd missed the big payoff.

They waited alongside a long, beautiful lake, clear water and green woods. Fish jumped. Berries were ripe. There was no pressure. All they had to do was survive the trip home.

As the other's lay about, reckoning their goods, swapping beef stew for ham and lima beans, Jim went through the pay slips, finishing them up.

For thirty days, according to his calculations, they had amassed an average of five hundred forty hours, his own hours were up to six hundred because, naturally, he'd been extra busy. The checks would run better than two thousand apiece. His own would be more than twenty-five hundred.

He scratched into his scraggly beard indulgently. When he told Bear of the approximate size of his check, he added, "That'll buy you a boat and a motor to go up the river to your family."

"Sure," Bear said. "I'll pick up the slip at the office and take it to the bank."

"Bank?" Jim asked. "You goin' to save it?"

"No, they advance on the check, see," Bear explained with professional acumen. "They take ten per cent. You get the cash money right off and sign over the check. It's easy."

"You mean you'll give some lousy bank a couple hundred dollars just to get your hooks on a wad of dough right away?"

"It's the way we do it," Bear said.

"Look, Bear, you don't need so much money," Jim said unwarily. "Just live at my place until your check comes, then you can get a boat out right away, take some nice things up to your family. It's going to be a long winter, Billy."

For the first time an edge of steel had crept into their relationship. Billy Bear was Billy Bear. If he wanted a roof he wanted a roof, and if he had earned a check, he would spend it.

And as Blake was cheerfully taking pictures of the group, he posed Jim and Billy Bear together. Both were thickly bearded now, their clothes in rags and packed with charcoal and food grease, but they put their arms around each other's shoulders and smiled for the camera. Bear was as usual slightly cross-eyed and broken-toothed, but his head was up, his eyes bright, his smile honest. A picture to remember.

They were on the last load aboard the goose. The plane took off away from the long burn but it passed low over Anyuk, the village on the Porcupine, and the people there looked up and waved, and no doubt the malemutes were raising hell and Whatshername never missed a lick on the fish she was slitting.

And curiously, as though the pilot knew, the plane angled on off course, up the river. Bear grunted excitedly, gripped Jim's arm, then seized his neck, yanking him over to look out the glass port at the river below.

"There! There! There she is!"

And far, far distant below in the little river bend among infinitesimal spruce trees was a cabin roof and a few minute figures along the river fishing.

"See? That's my family!" Bear yelled, and somehow this was communicated to Filson, who knew and had even planned it, because, knowing as he did every little nook and cranny in the northern half of Alaska, he must have known this was Bear's house and domain, and perhaps, like Jim, he was hoping that something would jar Bear loose from town.

Filson looked back through the open door, grinned under his big sunglasses, banked the plane and dived sharply, suddenly scaring the shit out of everybody.

"See! See! See!"

And Jim, in Bear's stranglehold, saw the river coming up at them, cringed and prayed with bloody sweat.

Then Filson neatly leveled off the goose and came in at treetop level, at near stalling speed, giving Bear every opportunity in the world to remember he was a free man, a family man, a man of many wonderful blessings, and Jim with his own eyes saw the stocky, almond-eyed, black shiny-haired Eskimo lady in clean mother hubbard, a few kids of assorted sizes waving up in excited joy at the big aluminum goose tracking up the river. Bear tried to wave, but the ports were too small.

"You want off, just yell," Jim strangled out, but Bear didn't yell.

Filson would have put it down on the river, Jim knew. Filson would do anything with an easy dash and smile, and it would have been grand to let Billy Bear off at his cabin with his wife and children and a $2500 balance in town, but Bear didn't yell, didn't even make the right kind of a face. He was only greatly surprised and proud and happy to have seen the group for such a small second.

So be it. Now maybe he would go back to town, get his money, buy the boat and take it back home before freeze-up, maybe even in time for some good fishing.

"Hey!" he yelled at everybody, "did you see 'em?"

And someone yelled back, "Yeah, Billy, who was that big guy with his arm around your old lady?"

"Oh shut up," Bear said. "I got a good old lady. She don't fuck around none."

"Just her friends," someone yelled, and the chorus, "and she ain't got an enemy in the world!"

Billy laughed proudly with the rest of them. He was sweating with excitement and Jim adjusted his neck back to normal, thinking *O Billy go home.*

They flew high over the great Yukon, miles wide and many-channeled, so full of islands and sandbars they were uncountable, and not settled down even yet, sprawling over an enormous area, going anywhere it felt like going, the identical spirit of a native in drunktime.

They crossed through the bare jagged mountains, angling through the snowy granite peaks like a train through a cut, Filson taking a pleasure in seeing how close he cut it, knowing too that one or two misbeats of the engines would set those granite teeth into their wings. But it was a man at the control, and Jim was beginning to appreciate the male gambler blood, the rogue, the tester, inventor, the man who places life next to death in the hopeless gamble.

They flew lower over the Tanana Valley, a wilderness with an occasional little square hacked out and burned as the pioneers had done in Ohio. Little geometric homesteads set in the middle of a vast crazy forest, on top of a reservoir of permafrost which would never in a million years make any kind of decent farmland, but still the people tried. They found their boundaries and started clearing. They planted potatoes and a little hay. They tried to keep a cow, sometimes a nostalgic farmer might even keep a horse which in the end would eat him out of house and home, but they were always trying.

There were no slaves about. The Eskimos were no help, there was no flood of starving Swedes or Irish, no Indians or children indentured, and they had to try it with their own backs and brawn.

Chainsaws demolished the forest easy as pie, but could never cut enough firewood to thaw out a ground which could burn on top while frozen a foot below, and they would never be able to farm it. Never. There was only the fur and the flesh of the forest they were trying to obliterate, there was only the fine gold in the creeks, and the money of the government which was being squandered on unreliable installations supposed to guard the nation against attack from a foreign power.

But what would get Billy Bear home to his family and duty? What would get Jim Carondelet home to his new-coming child and redhaired wife?

They caught the Chena River and there in the distance appeared the towers of Fairbanks, the Northward Building rising like an idiot's delight from the low rooflines and the endless green-blue scene, and Filson quickly heeled into the north wind. As Jim held his breath, the plane landed, neither well nor badly, just down, and by then Jim had endless faith in that aging flyboy who was himself entangled with the north and would never be able to fly free again.

9

GREAT CABBAGE

JIM SAID a special goodbye to the aviator and spoke warmly to the other comrades of fire and ennui, and after handing over the beautiful pay slips to Blake, hopped into the back of a pickup truck with Bear. They were free and easy. They were rich and tired. They were starved for food and light. They were dirty beyond compare. Jim was already discovering most of his thoughts were of Nomi.

"We go to store first, get clothes," Bear said with certitude, a knowledge born of experience. "Then we go to Swede baths and get cleaned up. Then go to bank."

"O.K.," Jim agreed, not really caring about anything now, borne aloft as a plane on pure success, a man who worked a month doing what he wanted and got his summer's pay for it. It was all his fellowship would have given, and there was still a month of summer to go.

Walking down First Avenue, Bear said, "Maybe we ought to have a drink, eh, Jim?"

Jim said, "Let's get cleaned up first."

"We got to have some beers to sweat," Bear insisted and Jim kept demurring, until presently they were joined along the street converging on the Swedish baths by their familiar, high-smelling comrades carrying bundles of new clothes and sacks of beer.

Jim bought a dozen bottles of beer, and they all proceeded like battle-weary troops down the block to a house with a crude sign saying, SWEDISH BATHS, SHAVE FREE.

Jim let himself be carried along by the others who were yelling and making obscene gestures to attract attention to their beards and filthy rags. Inside they shucked off their clothes and gave them to a toothless, perpetually grinning Finnish woman who ignored their lack of modesty, and they paid her husband a dollar apiece for the privilege of sitting in his steam bath and drinking beer. It was a bargain.

They lay easily on the benches in the hot, humid room, opening the beers and drinking. Triumphant curses and jests rolled out of them with wondrous pleasure. The room was filled with the din of happy men's voices raising hell in general. Rich men, sweating men, beerfull men, and as the sweat oozed like scum out of each pore, the char of a million acres poured out on it, and their colors gradually shifted without benefit of soap from a greasy black to an ashy gray to a white of salmon belly. It was astonishing how dirty they were, how much actual ash and charcoal they had absorbed. It floated off in a slurry, a peat bog muck, an uncleanness going, until gradually an honest sweat ran off their whitening torsos, and the place was ringing with laughter and ribaldry.

"You been cheatin' on me, you mothah fucka!"

"Jeez Chris', who farted?"

"Goddamn! All that loot!"

"Here's to old Goldmine Jim!"

"Jeez Christ, Jim—what'sa matter with your pecker, boy? I never seen nothing so oversized!"

"Y'oughta see it when I let it out."

"Jeez Chris', no wonder I ain't a timekeeper."

"Sho now, he didn't get that job on account of his goddamn good looks you think?"

The room steamed thickly, O what a hell of a dollar's worth of steam. Their bodies streamed with ash and charcoal, their faces cleared, their hair leaked black crud, and as the beers ran in and out and their strength was sapped, they one by one moved off to the washroom where a cold shower killed them, shook them, shattered them. They kept saying it didn't hurt because of the effect of the heat, but they could hardly keep from screaming.

The Finn provided a couple of razors to chop at their beards. Jim decided to leave his on, until someone said, "I never saw a purtier fucking face than yours, Jim. Kinda looks like Igarote pussy." Then he grabbed soap and razor and shaved off the meandering fuzz which was the best he could do under any circumstances.

They put on their new, stiff, starchy, factory-smelling clothes—All in blue went my love—and they were a handsome, clean-cut rollicking crew pouring out of the Finn's.

They only had one problem. They had little actual cash money and they were primed for a party.

Lo and behold, the Miracle. With Jim bitching along at his heels, offering to loan half of his last twenty dollars, here came the Supreme Being, Billy Bear, loaded, swollen up with a couple thousand dollars, announcing wisely he'd put half of it into travelers' checks.

"That way they can't steal it," he said.

"Who?"

"You know. Those sonsabitches that steal."

"Oh."

So no matter what he'd said, how much he'd protested, Jim saw his friend, his comrade, his brother, saw him pocket the wad of money, a bland banker's smile sucking off the last of the Eskimo's sober largess: glasses glittering, lips bright, power of attorney in hand, that's business.

Clean in shades of blue, shaved in shades of light, Jim went with his friend down the street.

"First thing, we got to get something to eat," Jim said. "How about it? I'll spring for a big goddamn steak, then we'll go over to my place and think a little bit before going hogwild."

"Got girls at your place?" Bear laughed. "C'mon, old pal, I'm buying."

"Look, Bear, you can't buy the whole stinkin' shiteree. C'mon, let's eat."

No, Bear would not eat. He wanted to buy everybody a drink to celebrate his good luck. "Just one, then we eat. O.K., Jim?"

There was nothing he could do.

As a last hope he said, "Billy, please, for Christ's sake, let's go to the post office. Let's send a thousand-dollar money order to your wife, then we can blow the rest. O.K.?"

"Sure," Billy said uninterestedly, turning into the Pedro. "Right after one drink."

It was lost then.

Jim had to grin and bear it, although he could still see the three kids' arms waving at the silver goose, could still feel the headlock Bear had on him as they flew over the mother hubbarded angel.

But no more. "Goodbye. I tried, and fuck you all."

Sure, Ernie was in the Pedro, and sure, the high cowbell was smashed with his pale hand as Billy Bear said, "Timber," in a quiet, firm, very modest tone, disclosing the nervous pride he really felt. "Vodka for me, give everybody else whatever they want," and casually tossing over a hundred-dollar bill.

They never made the steak house, nor the post office. Once Jim angrily snarled at Ernie for pocketing a handful of loose bills off the bar, and it only resulted in them moving along to another bar manned by another sharpie called Tex.

Jim wanted to break loose. He wanted to find Nomi and feed her. He wanted to check in at Noel Street and see Joe and Kitty, but his immediate loyalty was with Billy Bear, and as the klooches and white whores collected around him, Bear drunkenly denied even knowing Jim at all, accused him of being a thief, of a crook sucking around, and cried *get the* *hell away from me* so that Jim ultimately lost him to the coyotes in the bars, and the gathering klooch cousins and bartenders. Then there came a rather handsome colored girl in tight, silvery bolero pants which were designed to show her vulva in every detail, as if the silver mons were real, and Jim had the feeling that perhaps those skintight pants were really padded out to look like a woman's sex, the godhead yoni. (Afterward Jim decided Merriweather had passed the word that the pigeon had arrived, and the South Siders had sent their most sensual perfumed and beautiful girl to lure Bear out.) Jim noticed out of the corner of his eye the colored men who were observing, or protecting their bird, as she sidled through the bar, spreading her scent. Bear had it. He grabbed her suddenly in his arms and clamped his hand onto her cunt as if to tear it out of her right there, and as she covered the immediate pain with a soft smile, she slipped her white tongue into his mouth, and then chuckled in his ear.

Like a man carrying a ton, he lurched to his feet, grabbed money and under the baleful eyes of the bartender and a half-dozen white and native whores, Bear staggered blindly to the door, unseeing, tasting only the taste of her tongue, and that was all he wanted.

Jim, himself in a stupor from having come along this far, started with him. One of the colored men looked kindly at him and said, "You want to go along, there's aplenty," and Jim nodded tiredly.

Bear ignored him. He was already blindly humping against the colored girl, trying to get into her through the silver pants as she pealed like a little bell, "Slow down, baby, slow down."

"Boy is pretty hard up, ain't he?" the black driver said.

He didn't care. He could have been Merriweather. It was only a business to him. He provided an opposite to an opposite for a price. He profited, but he risked. He gave and he took, and he wasn't emotional or philosophical or moralistic. He parked and laughed and spoke to all in friendly tones, "Come on, boys, have a drink with me."

Where is an end to time when the sun is an overhead circle like a golden angel up there twenty-four hours? That's my compass.

Bear followed the quicksilver-plated girl into a back room like a dog after a bitch, and never returned.

Jim had a beer and waited. And some time later, in the fog of funky drunk, he sauntered over to the door and into the back hall, and was met by the driver who was simply a pro doing a night's work. "Want a girl?" he asked.

"No. I guess not. I'm looking for Bear."

"He went out the back way."

The girl in the silver pants floated into the hall, light as fluff. She was high on shit, she was alone, and Jim knew that the man was telling the truth. Sure, somewhere in this neighborhood maybe upstairs, maybe next door, Bear was going through the process of being stripped and picked.

So he looked at the tight silver pants with her cunt like a vulture outline, and her beautiful taut stomach and bright quick breasts flashing dusky in the pale red light and her teeth perfectly fine and white like her dark high eyes and he felt like throwing up. He waited, held his breath, ambled outside and let two thousand dollars worth of beer stream in anguished tears out his throat to the ground, and then as his eyes cleared, he wandered around to the front of the square-built, barely standing shack, certainly far less a structure than any on that long forgotten river, and took a cab back to town.

"Goodbye, Billy, you dumb shit. You stupid Eskimo fucking bastard showoff Siwash cousin."

The day was still light. He had no idea of what time it was. He knew he had to go by Noel Street. Yet where was Nomi? He was drunk, but he couldn't be hurt because he hadn't cashed his check, hadn't given a lick to the banker, had only the change left from his stateside savings.

He walked. It was nothing compared to the long marches they had accomplished out near Porcupine creek.

He walked through the sunlight at midnight, down the birch-lined, dusty streets toward the landmark of the Northward Building. A few cars and cabs lurched over the rutted, potholed street. Malemutes all howling from their backyard chains sang Strauss for him. He forced his aching knees to go and go and go. He would get through this long, endless daylight night some way, if only by his remembrance of a distant civilization. He walked down the empty, disordered sidewalk, where in the vacant lots cabbages had been planted and were now already as big as basketballs.

He stopped to rest and look at the great green-silvered leaves stretching out like elephant ears, growing wildly in haste, even as himself.

He picked out the cabbage he wanted. The biggest, the most colorful, the most taut with expanding juicy flesh, and with his back bowed like a bull, he heaved to right and left against the root until it broke free from the shallow soil, and became his prize. He carried the enormous pale-veined globe, its ears flapping against his hip, and continued on back toward Second Avenue somewhere in the middle of an unexplored state. Now, he thought, I have my cabbage but can I eat it? I don't chew my cabbage twice. Once a cabbage head, always a cabbage head. Like leaving the goat to guard the cabbage.

Still staggering a bit from the barrel of beer that had passed through him, he clutched the stolen cabbage. It smelled delicious. Very fresh and sexy. This cabbage, this heavy, unpounded, unsqueezing mass of crunchy green leaves would be reported as immortal as Homer's wine-colored sea.

He tried to shift the cabbage from side to side but it was too big to hold on one arm alone. He had to carry it propped against his stomach.

The obvious solution, he thought, is to eat the cabbage and redistribute the weight. But he could not bring himself to harm the enormous, beautiful thing, though he knew that in tearing it from the earth he had killed it.

In time, in hours, it seemed, he crossed Noel Street and turned down it in a dazed curiosity. He lived somewhere along here. His civilized friends were asleep in one of those houses. He hadn't visited them for weeks. Maybe he should stop in and say hello. But where was Nomi? She had to be found. She had to be saved. If that Sonofgod had the guts, what about handsome, educated and clever James B. Carondelet. No?

There it was. The yellow frame house. A light in the bedroom window. Joe and Kitty tearing off a piece likely.

He was tempted to turn into the yard and enter the door of his home, but he had not finished. He went on. Why was a light in the window when it was still daylight outside?

The cabbage was set and cool in his hands. It jogged heavy as a medicine ball against his stomach. And as he passed the big, green building and wandered on into the street of saloons, more people were loose and walking. More were standing around in the daylight.

The howls of innumerable dog throats never let up.

O some time the night would have to begin.

Sometime end.

He went by Arblick's Highdive. Its jukebox blasting as loud or louder than any of the rest. The door was open, one could look in and see his whores sitting bored in Naugahyde chairs, in a straight line by the door. Utterly desolated, cold-blooded cunt.

At least blood of some color flowed in the bodies of the over-pigmented skins on the South Side, and laughter could come from even the most haunted of whores. But fuck Billy Bear. Fuckemallandfeedemfish, he said, clutching the prize cabbage of the State Fair to his breast, and limping. Some tear in the leather of his sole, some spruce cone picked up between his toes.

"Now then," he asked himself aloud, "now then, Father Jim, NunJim, what do you do now, sire, padre, ma'am? Play that chase game? No sir. Set bread on the waters, bed on daughters, red on slaughters." He patted the cabbage head. "Yaa-ooo!" He joined the dogs' howls.

He was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, spraddle-legged, wondering what he was to do next, when arm in arm with a red-faced little construction bum of heavy jaw and little forehead, she came by. A gentle smile was on her lovely lips, her eyes lost in a distance, until she saw him there alone and wonderful. Almost instantly her eyes were alight, her smile a grin, and she said, "Hi, farmer, goin' to market?"

"Hi, Nomi."

"You been off growin' that thing all summer?"

"Yup," Jim said. "When you got to grow, you got to grow."

"See you later." Her eyes lashed his, and her mouth was firm, and he knew she would have to shake the strange arm on her.

Goddamn, he thought, don't fuck him first, but he said, "Ah'm goin' to be rotcheer."

And she giggled, already on her way.

"O.K.," he said to himself, watching her tall, loose-jointed bluejeaned figure ease on down the street and turn a corner. "O.K., you saw her. She hasn't changed. She's screwed exactly one hundred and seventy-five different studs, the long and the short and the tall, probably two hundred, because she don't observe Sabbath."

He carried his cabbage through the open door of the Pedro and laid it on the bar.

Ernie charged up the barway, graceful as a pinto horse full of booze, and as Jim ordered a beer, he went through the old familiar crashing action of holing the can and slinging it down his way while forgetting the change, until Jim said, "You raise the price since I went off and made a three-thousand-dollar check?"

Ernie grinned gracefully and flung the half dollar up spinning by him.

Victory.

A little Eskimo came close, murmuring, "I got twenty-eight cents; half a dollar, I can make a beer."

Jim gave him the half dollar. A total waste. Better he sent the half dollar to his wife to buy pliers with.

In the mail Kitty is saving, in all those letters from her, there must be a telegram saying, "A bouncing baby boy named James B. Junior, big as a cabbage."

Jim looked at the foamy beer can by the cabbage.

He couldn't drink it. He had drunk so much beer since the plane had landed that morning, he'd never appreciate the imitation-colored, acid-flavored, fortified water again. A billion cans, every one exactly identical except for those lucky rare ones where a mouse had happened to creep in the can and be drowned in phony suds. Ah, voilà!

O where is she? She's bent arched and spread as the red-faced sonofabitch bites her tit and drives his fist into her cunt.

She is giggling as she gobbles him up, chaining him into the heart of her country.

He will never be let loose. In the sty, the swine stay.

For every pow, he gets a steel hook. For every indignity, he gets a millstone. For every dollar, he loses lifetime.

She eased up alongside him, spreading her sweet crotch over the barstool. He pushed the untouched beer to her. She let it be.

"Come on, Nomi," he said. "I seen the village. I seen it all. Let's go home."

"All you want is a quick piece. Tell me what you saw."

"An old man said he was a Christian."

"That was that sonofabitch Wholecheese."

"A woman named Whatshername."

"You laid her, you bastard."

"A guy named Billy Bear."

"A wino, a half-breed fuckup."

"A lot of country."

"Miles and miles of moss and tundra and spruce trees, of alders and birch and lowbush cranberries, and blue willow, and bogs and ponds and sloughs and lakes and rivers. What else?"

"Sky."

"It's here. You can see it even now."

"How come you're sober?"

"I been sick. I'm trying to keep kind of straight."

"You didn't go to the clinic. You cheated."

"I don't cheat on anyone, Jim, not you anyway."

She owned him again, with only the simplicity of her look and the steadiness of her voice.

"I made a shitpot full of money, Nomi," he said.

"Yes," she said. "And the summer's not gone yet either."

"Hey!" she yelled at Ernie, and Jim had the feeling that she was drunk as ever, only he was drunker and that changed the comparison. "Gimme some goddamn vodka!"

"Money?" Ernie asked. "Punkin pie, you ain't been payin' for a while."

"I got money."

She tossed over a twenty.

"No," Jim shoved the twenty back at her. "I got it."

He tossed a silver dollar he'd rescued for Bear onto the bar.

"Now, that's money."

She drank the cheat shot and yelled again. Five times in two minutes she hit the blinding white fire.

"There now," she said, "I feel better. That makes it up. Oh say now, I'm beginning to feel like a human being again."

But her eyes were once removed. Her smile a fixed gash.

Her words tumbling out were words she should not have said.

"I been not feeling so terrible powerful lately," she said, "and I thought if I laid off the hard stuff it'd help, but Jimmy boy, it don't help at all, and I'm just a dumb fucker, a dumb Eskimo half-breed, a big horse's ass, a nothin'. See, so I'm me, and I drink."

A volley of gutsy coughing, tearing up her lungs into wet slivers, and spitting on the floor as Buck Orneri rose up off his stool, jangled his guitar, and commenced bellowing his song, "I brought you a dozen roses so red. . . ."

Full circle, Jim thought with an ache of tiredness in his head. Arctic Circle. It goes around and around.

Again she hawked some red phlegm to the floor.

"Y'know, kid," she said distantly, "somebody took my parky."

"When?" Jim asked.

"I don't know," she said, "but I don't feel good without it."

"Can you get another?"

"No, my sister, she don't make parkys no more. You know," she said, "I went by your house lots of times. I didn't know you were gone to work. One time I was goin' to sneak in and get in your bed, but the door was locked. O boy, was that a hard night!"

"Jim," she said suddenly, staring at him, "Jim, Jim O Jim, are you married?"

"You know I am," Jim said.

"Just wondering, y'know."

"Where did you go with that guy?"

"Mother's."

"Whose mother?"

"Just a good friend. We all call her Mother. She lets us have a room and turns us on whenever we need it. And she lets us wear long pink dresses."

"You want a cabbage?" he asked. "It's all I've got."

"You oughta see me in a long pink dress. We dance, and they lets us do about whatever we want. You wanta get high?" she asked, belting down another shot. "We can go over there. We can even get the hard shit, but it costs more. We can lay down and Mother will turn us on. Want to?"

"No," Jim said. "No, I'm high already."

"Jesus, you're not much company tonight, are you?"

"*Et puis, et puis encore.*"

"Oh! Fuck you! You sonofabitch! Who do you think you are so goddamned smart ass?" she howled. No one paid any attention.

"Aw, go turn a trick," Jim said, and took his cabbage and moved down the bar.

"You just keep your smart mouth outa my business!"

He turned his back to her and threw some money on the bar; the ever-ready Ernie ran with a rush to the beer box and bounced the foamy can in front of him.

Jim drank a cold slug and felt better, and as he touched a cabbage leaf with wonder, a nice-looking, pockmarked klooch sidled in from a corner. She was a little drunk and a little dirty, but in this light she wasn't hopeless.

"Buy me a beer?"

"Sure, hon," he said. "One beer for this lady."

"You wanna dance?" she asked.

"Sure, doll," he murmured. "Watch my cabbage, Ernie. I don't want to lose it."

"Yeahbo."

Jim put his arm around the klooch to lead her to the little dance floor. Howl! Bark! Snarl! Nomi tore in like a bitch-wolf, yelling in a mad animal offkey, "Get your fuckin' hooks off'n him!"

And with a quick swing, she knocked the klooch to the floor.

"You just mind your own business," she yelled at the fallen klooch who was holding her face in pain and looking sullenly at the floor.

"You don't know nothin', do you, stupid?" she turned on Jim.

"I'm just a wayfaring stranger," Jim said. "But is it all right if I dance?"

"Not with her," Nomi said. "She's got syphilis. Don't you know anything at all? How do you manage to get by? Goddamn, I don't know, *Kanuckanuckpuk!*"

She was crying. Just a little, just tears leaking out of her big, rich eyes, she was looking at the bar and getting her breath back.

The klooch got to her feet and moved along.

"Why doesn't she get herself cured?" Jim asked.

"Oh fuck you, stupid," Nomi said. "We don't like clinics! We don't like bureaus! We don't like papers or printing! Now why don't you ever learn something?"

"O.K.," he said, "take it easy. Let's go home."

"Too early." She turned and yelled at Ernie for another drink.

"This is a long day," Jim said. "Too long. Let's go home."

"I told you," she screamed in the rabid piercing tone, "I ain't goin' home till I'm ready!"

She drank off her drink and stalked outside. Jim watched her straight back, her blueblack hair bouncing, and rambled along behind her. It was still daylight, though no one noticed.

"Nomi," he said, "I'm pooped."

"Shut up," she said, looking down the street for a cab.

"Look, you dumb bitch," Jim snapped loose. "Don't tell me to shut up. You got hair on your chest?"

"Shut up, I said."

"Are you coming home with me?" he asked.

"I wouldn't be caught dead with you."

"You're the coldest, clammiest piece of ass in town," Jim said.

She was stunned into silence.

"Get the hell on your way," he continued in exhausted rage. "A cold wet clam at best."

"Stupid," she retorted coldly.

He raised up his fist to strike her down. She faced him indifferently. If he'd had an ax he'd have split her skull, so tattered were his nerves, so shattered was his whole being.

They were on the sidewalk in daylight, ready to fight, both lost in red anger. But as he looked into her cool, contemptuous eyes he felt a deeper contempt himself, for her and for himself.

"Forget it, Nomi," he said, and let his arm fall.

A cab drew up and she sat beside the driver.

He said nothing. He watched her go into the sunlight of midnight. And he turned in confusion and tiredness and drunkenness to the left and saw, almost on top of him, the paddy wagon. Two uniformed police sat bored, cheated of their prey. If only he had smashed her, they would have had an easy pinch. They wouldn't look at him as he rambled by. They were looking at the dashboard as if there were a new kind of crime growing there.

"You could go and put the arm on Arblick," he muttered at them. "It might stick for an hour or so. It might make something of the world right for an hour or so."

But they sat in their cage-machine, staring at the dashboard, hoping for an Eskimo to fall down drunk someplace. They knew Nomi. They wouldn't expect her to be jailbird material until about daybreak when the bars were closed and she had drunk a couple gallons of booze and had fucked ten men and had no place else to go, except a ditch. They knew her. They could get her almost any time.

Of course, Arblick used a bit of her, so she just couldn't be picked up like a common klooch.

—For shame, Jim boy, on home with you—

He surged like a torrent of constricted water up the street, foaming and shoaling in his mind, all the night's whirlpoolings: Bear, the colored gent, Nomi, Silver Pants. Where were they now? Good old Jimbo, he was highballin' it home to bed, boy howdy. They don't catch this cat with that klooch for bait. Nawsir. Neither klooch nor ass shall change his pass. . . .

He staggered up the steps of the yellow house. 400. A long month. Lots had happened. Joe's car was out in front so it was still their house anyway. He tried the front door, but it was locked. He was puzzled. Locked doors were an enemy. Jim was always throwing keys away. Without a key there is no lock. And yet here he was locked out of his own abstractedly legal house. Surely he was entitled to his bed without having to knock on a door and beg admittance. Surely, and with his earlier rage compounded by this confrontation of lockout, he smashed his chest and shoulder against the door, and the door crashed open.

Jim ignored it. He was mad as a bull simply because that goddamned Joe liked to lock doors. For what? What is there to steal? What is there even to give away?

He was thus profoundly engaged in the daylit room at two in the morning when the lights came on as if to give credence to a code. It was Joe, nervous, naked, looking around the corner of the kitchen, probably a knife in his hand unseen. Jim heard a faint clatter and knew the knife was falling, and Joe's face composing from fear and mistrust and defiance into an orderly odious door-locker.

"Hey, Jim! Where in hell you been? Ho ho!"

All cheer, all hail.

"Out. What did I learn? Nothin'." Jim tried to grumble, but he couldn't help respond to a smile.

"How was it?" Joe asked, and Jim knew the right answer.

"I hit 'em for better'n two grand."

"Say, that's the way!" Joe grinned. "More to come?"

"Depends on the fires, I guess," Jim said. "Any mail?"

"About a hundred letters from Frieda. And one wire. It just came tonight. Two grand, eh? Maybe I could take on some of that."

"Why not?" Jim said. "You working?"

"Like a beaver. I got a couple G's too, but it was all overtime. It'd be more fun out in the boondocks."

"No," Jim said. "It's not any more fun than anywhere else."

He fumbled at the telegram as Joe said, "You break the door?"

"I don't like a locked door," Jim said plainly as he tore at the yellow envelope. Would it say she died in childbirth? Would it say he had a son? "I wish you wouldn't lock a door. A lock is a denial of someone, see?"

"You ain't just ashittin', boy," Joe said, miffed. "Keep the crumby skee-moes out."

"No point in keepin' anyone out. Better to try to get 'em in." Jim knew a lost argument when he got into one.

"I like privacy," Joe said.

"Yeah," Jim said unthinkingly, callously, his attention on tearing out the message and unfolding it.

"What do you mean, 'yeah'?" Joe said indignantly.

"Nothin'," Jim murmured reading, then he read it aloud. "A beautiful, black-haired, round-eyed daughter, healthy happy howling."

Jim was silent. Joe was relaxed now.

"If I had a cigar," Jim said weakly.

"Caught a girl? Well, they're easiest to raise," Joe said.

"Yeah," Jim thought, having been acquainted with a few girls. "Sure—" he said. "But what did she name her? That's important."

"Probably waiting for you. Didn't you have a name picked before you left?"

"Yeah," Jim said, "James B. Carondelet, Jr."

Joe laughed and Jim laughed. They were on the same plane together, like when they were sitting in the apartment in Fresno talking about labor unions.

"Let's have a drink," Joe said. "I got a bottle."

"Fine," Jim said, "I need a drink. I been havin' the craziest damned time lately. Some day I'll tell you."

Joe fetched out from under his bed, hidden in a dirty sock, a half pint of whiskey which had been halfway nipped down. He extended the bottle to Jim, who took it without looking, toasted toward the hanging light.

"Here's to little Miss Whoosiz," and he drank a good slug. He winced and handed the bottle to Joe.

"Here's to a new Miss Carondelet," he toasted grandly, and killed the bottle. Joe slapped Jim's bony back. "Well, Pops, I gotta hit the sack."

"Yeah. Goodnight, Joe," Jim said, dazed by the indecipherable day.

10

HAYDRYING WIND

THE ARCTIC summer was only a few hours away, the trapper's cabin, the rotten sled, the pure river, the village working the fish, the complete wilderness only a morning ago; an airplane flight, a steam bath, an ocean of beer, the money flowing like the river from poor Bear's ravished paycheck, the black whores and their keepers, and Nomi, O that stubborn Okie Irish royal blackhaired witch, and now Pops. Pops Carondelet. Pops. Pappy. What shall we name her? What's a good name? No perfect name for a little baby girl? Nomi? Dandy? Whoosiz!

Jim's room was musty. There were no suns circling through spruce in blue-bowl sky. He opened a window and pulled down the shade. The dogs were howling. The night was still day, approaching morning. His prize cabbage was being kicked out into the street by an Eskimo wino swamper. It lay in the fine, pulverized dust by the curb. He lay down on his bed and felt the sun pulling at him as he limply wilted and drifted off to sleep.

He was thinking dreamily of Nomi. He was thinking he had no right to lose his temper with her. She lived her life as she saw it. Someone should. What could he ever do for her? Good luck, Nomi, you dumb bastard, wherever you are. . . .

Behind his eyes the darkness became profound and without measure. His sleep of recapitulation was disturbed. Nomi was sitting on the bed, kicking her shoes off. She stood, or rather slumped upward, lurching, and wiggled out of her jeans. She was undressed. She was dark, slim and beautiful. Her scars and distortions were unseen in the amber shadows, her hair coiled in a glistening mane over her shoulder toward her high breasts. Her eyes were dull, frozen with vodka, but she was an instinct which could never be drunk under. She came to the one man in the territory who loved her, whose need of her in his lifetime of necessities was well known to her dark soul.

"Who are you?" he asked through a baffled mind's poetry.

"My name is Nomi." She crept under the sheet, and lay down on top of him.

"Jim . . . " Her voice caught in a sharp edge of a cough, and she had to bury her head in the pillow to stifle the branching, blooming thorntree in her chest and throat, and after a moment to take a sad, quick breath, she lay her mouth by his ear and whispered urgently, "Jim, I love you."

"Yes, Nomi," he said, "we love."

In the morning, the pillow was streaked with beads of blood and as Jim watched her sleep like a dead, dumb Eskimo, Joe poked his head in the door and said, "Off to work," then he noticed the black head of hair against the white sheet. His mouth turned sour. "Who's that?"

"Nomi."

"Jesus Christ, Jim, I thought you had good sense," Joe said. "I'll see you later."

Jim lay still. He was trying to think of some way to preserve her life without destroying it. So long as she could maneuver, she'd never go to the clinic. She had been hurt too many times by too many professionals. If she were too sick to care, she'd be too sick to live. And, in fact, the very source of her vitality and being was excessive love of living. She was born to lose, the logic was remorseless. Yet he could not bear to have her lose.

He stirred to get up and his movement triggered an emotion in her dream so that she shrieked in a sudden intake of fear. The cry tore at his own heart; she was facing a devil or monster he would never know. The frightful creatures in his own dreams were simply Freudian symbolism clinically explained and cynically rationalized. Yes, I dreamed of a big telephone pole and a bowl of spaghetti, doctor.

He dressed quickly into the clothes of yesterday, all new except for his torn shoes, which reeked of spruce smoke, a romantic and wild incense, from Niobe's pyre. He carried the shoes into the kitchen and sat in a chair to put them on. A lot of stitching was rotted out. They would have to be resewn before he was called on another fire.

Kitty came out of her bedroom. "Hi, kiddo, Joe told me the news. Congratulations."

"Thanks, doll," Jim said, looking at her carefully. Somehow she was changed. She seemed to be more forceful, more independent, more of her own self.

"Nomi's in my bed. She came in late. She's sick as hell."

"Oh—" Kitty shook her head.

"She's got to be patched up."

"You tried that once, remember?" Kitty said.

"But I didn't have time. I went out on that damned fire and she slipped back. She's worse now, lots worse."

"I like her, you know," Kitty said. "But it's so damned hopeless."

They heard Nomi go into the bathroom, cough and retch, spit.

"What can I do?" Kitty asked.

"Get her on her feet, and clean. Talk to her a little, she won't listen to me."

He waited, drinking coffee. He heard the shower run, he heard Nomi giggle, her coughing cease. When they came out, Nomi was dressed in Kitty's clean denim jeans and blouse. Kitty's eyes were bright and she went immediately to the stove, turning her back on Jim. She was humming a jaunty little song which Jim finally realized was the tune to "Roses of Love."

Nomi was silent and pale. Her eyes were luminous against the glow of her skin.

"Hi, Nomi, get enough sleep?" he asked.

"Too much. Sleep is for the dead."

Kitty brought a cup of coffee and some breakfast. Jim couldn't understand the look on her face, so fevered and light.

"I couldn't keep it down," Nomi said. "It'd just waste it."

"I made it for you, honey," Kitty said.

"All right, O.K.," Nomi said.

As soon as Kitty saw that she was eating she said, "I'm late for work, good people. Now Nomi, don't get drunk and all fouled up again."

Nomi looked up at her and smiled. "I don't get fouled up."

"O.K.," Kitty said, "I'll see you when I get home. Just stick around. I'll lift a few steaks from the cook."

As soon as she was gone, Nomi put down her fork and lighted another cigarette.

"She made love to you in the bathroom, didn't she?"

"Never send a girl to do a man's job." Nomi studied her warped fingernails.

"Well, how was she? Pretty good?" Jim yelled.

"Depends on how you look at it," Nomi drawled, and then giggled.

Jim settled down. "By God, I guess you're right."

"It wasn't anything," Nomi said. "She needed some way to love. So does everybody, you know."

"Yes'm, but she'll want more and more."

"No," Nomi said. "You don't understand. She don't need no more. Not from me. Maybe you."

"First thing we've got to do is get you some clothes," Jim said, angry at himself for not comprehending.

She dropped the cigarette and said bitterly, "Oh Christ, I knew it!" and ran to the bathroom holding her mouth.

When she came back, her face clammy and pale, she asked petulantly, "You got a drink in this house? I like a beer for breakfast."

"No," Jim said, "no drink of beer. Just milk."

"Oh, you sonofabitch, quit it!" she screamed. "Let me go my own way, have my own breakfast, my own rags, anything I want!"

"Not with me! You're going to goddamned well shut up and behave."

She changed under his anger. She took his hand gently and brought it up to her cheek. "You want to hit me?" she asked.

"No, Nomi, I don't. I just want to help."

She kissed his hand and drew it around the curve of her back, coming in close to him. She looked up at him through her dark smiling, mischievous eyes.

It was late in the afternoon before they left the house. Jim was defeated. He simply was no match for her. He had no control.

They walked as slowly and sweetly as proper lovers down through town, making the promenade. The other klooches were paired off and giggling at each other and whispering little items of idiotic gossip.

Jim did manage to get her into a store where she bought a new blouse, and he bought a piece of red silk ribbon to tie her hair.

She took the ribbon from him as if it were a jewel and swiftly tied it into the blueblack contour where it lay like a curious flame, like a gash on loon throat.

—I brought you a ribbon of red . . . ribbons of love I remember you said. . . .

"Would you go to a private doctor?" he asked as they went out into the street. "I'll pay for it."

"Now shut up about it," she said. "I'm feelin' fine. All I need is a drink."

Not only his beloved, she was the beloved harlot of mankind, the first and the last. But it was obvious to Jim that she was not going to live long enough to be anything more than the child she was right at this instant.

Here on the hot afternoon street she was tall, she was clear-skinned, she was blooming. She stood erect, svelte, clean, a red ribbon glistening in her heavy, sexy hair. Her breasts nudged into the new blouse, her hips were tight-held, powerful and lithe.

She studied the avenue with new eyes. The dust blew down the street on a sudden cool gust.

"It's going to rain," she said.

"Cry me a cloud of rain," he said.

"Musha, lemme laugh," she murmured.

"C'mon, Nomi," he said, "I'll buy your drink and start you off."

"Shut up," she said.

The redfaced, beefy pilebuck who had been with her yesterday shuffled by, saw them, looked curiously at Jim, decided he was nothing, stopped and moved close to Nomi. He licked his fat lips and made a fat little smile as best he could.

"Hi, Nomi, seein' the sights?"

"Sure, Jake," she said. "It's goin' to rain."

"Maybe," Jake hedged. "How about comin' over to the cabin?"

He didn't look at Jim. Jim was glad. What difference did it make? She had been to the cabin yesterday, she could as well go today. His heart was already torn out by the roots. One more or a hundred more or a thousand more—he was defeated. She was dying. He couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't marry her like Sonofgod, he couldn't keep her home even if he did. She refused alliance, refused stability. She refused because she was the daughter of a queen, because she was born and bred an anarchist.

"No," she said, "I'm busy."

The redfaced, slack-cheeked construction bum cocked up his baseball cap, showing a white and freckled baldness. "C'mon, Nomi," he said, trying to be persuasive, "we'll pick up a bottle."

"She said 'No'," Jim said.

The other didn't look at him, he looked into Nomi's face with dumb adoration, with pig lust. She was grinning at him; there was a silence as he waited for a word from her.

"My friend answers for me," she said.

The man never looked at Jim, he looked at her. He couldn't help himself. "Please, Nomi."

Jim had not believed it possible that she could make him do it, but he begged as if she were a water carrier in a desert.

"No, Jake," she said, "I'm busy."

This time he put his little pig eyes on Jim, not with anger or resentment, only a curiosity. "This is a goddamned good girl," he said to Jim.

Jim said, "I know."

And Jake pegged heavily on away from them.

"Let's walk," she said.

She took his arm and they became young lovers promenading. As they walked up Second Avenue, there was a lovely tranquillity for them, a communion of tenderness, a state of grace and poetry.

Sometimes like a haydrying wind was love on her hot amber face, poured like honey over lowbush cranberries, a fresh love brought through dirty bogfire, through the smoke and char of burned spruce forests, borne on the aurora, and bestowed as a crown of carved ivory, or a cloak of sinew stitched ermine.

As they came to the corner and paused for the light, a street sweeper moved slowly toward them. The sweeper wore clean jeans and shirt, and TRUSTY was stenciled on pants and shirt in white paint. The sweeper plodded along, pushing a large cabbage with his broom. It was an old, wilted, rotten, but still somewhat round cabbage. The sweeper was having himself a game, batting the cabbage this way and that way with his broom.

Jim recognized Billy Bear. He was a wreck of humanity, sweeping the streets as a punishment for some misdemeanor.

This was the king of the wilderness, this was the man who had carried them through the month of fire and forest.

Only yesterday it seemed they'd come in with a big paycheck on the books and they were giants among men. How could this be Billy Bear, looking like a sick dog in chains, playing croquet with a sick, dead cabbage in the gutter?

A pink Cadillac convertible slobbered toward the intersection. The driver, cuddled close by a gorgeous bewigged sweetheart, tried to brush off the sweeper, and as Bear reeled punch-drunk away from the chrome and pink, they laughed at him. Bear knew Arblick's car as did everyone in town.

And no one in town dared yell an obscenity—except perhaps Don Hennessy who was on down the street—at the obscenity passing by, its statesmanlike driver slit-eyed, owning the entire street and sidewalk, policeman and people and prisoners.

The convertible paused before Nomi and Jim, blocking their way.

"You're runnin' with cheap company," Arblick smirked smarmy across at Nomi.

"You better go fuck yourself, pimp!" Jim was ready to fight.

"See?" Arblick spoke coolly but more lethally to Nomi. "See what I mean? A newcomer. A cheapie loudmouth."

Before Jim could even move forward, the old rotten cabbage came arching over and smashed against the flaxen curls of the fancy pimp. A huge cabbage, all yellow and juicy, it splattered onto his cute little cuddly whore, and onto his windshield and onto his diamond ring. He humped his neck, as the slimy leaves hung like a bushel of sauerkraut over his ears and on the back of his neck. He shivered in panic and stepped on the gas.

In that instant Jim burst out laughing, a huge howling guffaw undamming from his chest, and with his laughter was Nomi's, and from down the street other peals of laughter rang from Jake and the construction bums, Mr. K—— and Ruthie and the delighted natives, even the barbers and clerks looked out to see Arblick in his chariot coming down the street.

"Hey, looka the cabbage head!" Jake yelled.

"Cabbage head! Cabbage head!" The chant commenced, louder than all the jukeboxes on all the streets and Arblick was held in by slower traffic. His face mottled red and white and crowned high with ancient sauerkraut.

"Cabbage head!" The promenading girls couldn't resist lining the streets as if a parade were passing. "Cabbage head!" they cried and giggled.

"Cabbage head!" the cobbler yelled, and farther on Don Hennessey, Martin and Fred saw him pass, picked it up and continued it into history. "Cabbage head! Cabbage head!"

"Take that to Congress with you," Jim said. If Arblick had looked back, a street sweeper would have been in the policeman's handball court in the basement of the Federal jail and the street sweeper would have been the handball.

As the street chanted the refrain and shook with its own laughter, Bear continued sweeping, dull-eyed, slumped over, dead on his feet. But he had scored. A goddamned Yojo bullseye. Even the littlest gets back something of what he gives away enormously.

"Hi, Bear," Jim said.

"I needa drink." Bear looked at his feet. "I'd sure like a drink."

"No," Nomi said. "You're a trusty."

"Thanks," Jim said to the sodden, limp native.

"That prick," Bear said.

A police car came by. The officer spoke. "Bear."

Bear moved on up the gutter, pushing his broom, sweeping up the filth of the city in his wilderness.

Quick, find me a contradiction: optimistic, positive, poetic, life-affirming, bitter-lemon ironies. No, I do not like this town.

Then they were back again with each other. As if they knew, had some warning that each minute was important to them, that every moment shared was a salt savor to the tongue, a crying memory. They came closer together. They were clean, upright, sublime young lovers, arm in arm, walking down the cluttered, haggard street of a boomtown. One day she had guided him to the cobbler's house. Today, where?

They passed log cabins and the vacant lots piling out greater and greater cabbages, and on until they came to a barrier of low willows. She silently and without apparent thought led on through the willows onto a stretch of riverbank deep with green grass and a few shrubs, and wholly isolated from the town.

He was angry for a moment. "You know this place?"

"I've never been here in my life," she said simply, and he believed her.

"We can't cross that river, can we?" she said, looking at the Chena flowing swiftly by, eating at the silty banks. Far across the swirling waters they could see the three-storied hospital. On its green lawn were indistinct figures sitting placidly on benches.

"So I guess," she said, "this is as far as we can go."

"Sit down, lie down, be with me," Jim said.

"I wish I could buy you a typewriter, or books of art, or pencils and paints," she said, looking at the whirlpools eddying over each other.

"Oh, dear Nomi," Jim groaned. "Only catch me a greyling, only pick me a few blueberries, only bring me what's yours."

It was the deepest expression of his soul. It hurt his chest to say it. He asked for everything, and he knew he could never have it.

"Roses of love I remember you said," she sang whimsically, watching the river with a fisherwoman's eye.

"Nomi, for God's sakes, what can we do?"

"You tell me, if you can." She coughed briefly.

"Sure," he said. "I can't. I don't know. I'm stupid. I could let you loose if you were going to happiness, to comfort, a family, a joy, a simple, tired kind of life, but I can't let you just die like a damned birch leaf off a tree in the dirty fall."

"Don't speak of it," she said. "There is nothing to do. I don't want there to be anything but now. If death is dirty, I'm dirty enough for it."

"Nomi, Nomi, Nomi."

Obviously, there was nothing that could be said. If she caught him the greyling, picked him blueberries, what would he do with them?

He took the ribbon from her hair and folded it on a clump of new grass. He watched her smile as he took her blouse button by button open and slipped it off her slim arms. Her new brassiere was unhooked with an infantile joy as the nipples of her breasts poked up like budding roses, and as she lay back into the deep grass he laughed and unzipped her jeans and slid them down off her sex and legs, and the light, fragile pants that crushed into his hand, and she lay before him like liquid sculpture, like a breathing heat.

She looked up at him and undressed him.

He cried and his tears soaked her bosom as she smoothed the back of his head sadly.

The taste of her breath was incomparable. Only it seemed so temporary that he couldn't hold back his sadness. Her eyes closed.

In a moment he was wholly lost in unconquerable ecstasy which he would have prolonged for eternity. It was a river of whirlpools to cross, a long wide river of whirlpools.

O river, O agony—

His heart stopped and a ragged sheet of lightning tore loose inside his skull. The pain was beyond courage. He screamed. He screamed as the pain skinned and ripped the tissue of the mind, and he saw pictures he couldn't possibly bear to see. Pictures of a future he couldn't bear to face. They were colored, moving images, scenes of Nomi herself in her place. And O, he screamed as a trapped animal, and light was exploding inside his skull with an absolute imperative purity. He screamed again as he saw his death in her arms, and she gripped, pulled his face down to hers with her arms, gripped her legs about his back and their sex wildly clashing like flint and iron in earthquake nights, and her breasts bulging with throbbing beats against his own charged and naked chest and pulling her face to his, his scream entered her mouth.

When he lived again she lay beneath him, the curious, satisfied Mona Lisa smile of the fucked woman on her face, but more than that, a glow, a radiance as of an immortality with a genuine meaning.

Ah dear God, he thought, what happened?

And seeing the lucent gold about and on her composed beauty, he saw that she was in God's arms, was indeed a holy human being.

It was true. It was exactly as it should be if anything made sense at all in this life.

They lay close to each other through the day. They were a total oneness. Jim had no thought except the extension, the living, the letting himself drift into the beyondness with her who knew the way. Who would be there soon enough. Who perhaps had been there already, was, in fact, only a heavenly ghost in his own mad mind.

"I would like to crawl inside of you, Jim, I would," she whispered. Her cough broke out alive again and she cursed it in gasps, "Goddamn goddamn sonofabitchin', goddamn, bastard. . . ."

It did no good for Jim to hold her hot body close, it did no good for him to kiss the shuddering corner of her mouth. The racking cough agitated her body against his. Her nipples burned his chest, the black beauty of her loin heaved and lifted like a mare leaping, and with a furious rage he mounted her before death and drove her down with an angry thrust, and even as she coughed, even as his face clenched up in a wroth fist, and their bodies fought like tangled sea beasts, she smiled, her eyes aglow from dark Buddha fire. And in the end the coughing spasm gave way to his rape, yielded to his forced possession, and she lay weak and bleeding in his arms.

"Jim," she said, "my chest hurts. We've got to get back."

He slipped her shoes on her battered feet and looked directly into her eyes. "I love you, Nomi, through all hell, through all time, through all snow and ice, remember. Remember, I'm on your side."

"Oh, sure, you crazy white man," she almost giggled, but her face was white and pain made her weak. "Now let's get a move on."

"I'd like to stay by this river in this day forever." He looked across at the opposite green bank and said, "What is the building over there that looks so gray and deadly?"

She plaited the red ribbon in her hair.

"St. Joseph's Hospital, and I'm not crossing these waters to go there." She turned away, pointing back toward town. "This is the way."

They emerged through the willows from the green plot to a graveled street and they strolled back the way they'd come.

Jim's sole was flapping loosely and her cough was drily rattling in her chest.

They were at the corner. In the distance was a street sweeper pushing a broom without haste. The drugstore where she was going was across the street. The cobbler's just a door or two down.

"Meet me in Mr. K——'s, O.K.?"

"Sure. I'll be just a minute," she answered carelessly. "See you later, Jimbo."

She walked straight as a spruce in a light breeze across the street, and watching her back, watching her beauty, her swaying hair, he had a sick moment of misgiving. But he had to let her go. If she couldn't cross a street by herself, well, what? *Et puis?*

He moved down the sidewalk. The cobbler was washing the window and the light coming through was garish on the mad-eyed face.

"Hey, Jim, I been lookin' for you!" He was eager, manic, somehow younger and more devilish, as if he might have been drinking. "Where've you been?"

"Down by the river," Jim said, pulling his shoe off. "We've got to get Nomi into that hospital."

"You'd lose her in there," K—— said, taking the shoe. "You don't have any time. I'll sew this up right now."

He hurried to the treadled sewing machine and after swatting the loose parts with glue, slapped the shoe under the needle.

"I'll have this good as new in just a minute."

"What's the hurry?" Jim asked.

"Fire, boy, a good, hot fire! East Canadian border. Gonna be another big one. You're just shot with luck."

"I can't go," Jim said. "I got to take care of Nomi."

"Oh, shit," K—— said. "Who in hell took care of Nomi before you turned up?"

"She's dying," Jim said. "They've killed her."

"If she's dying, she did it herself."

"The bartenders did it. Arblick did it."

"I used to run the Pedro myself in the old days, but I never liked those kids coming in about sixteen years old and dyin' off at about twenty or twenty-one. Oh, they're good hustlers all right, make you a mint, only thing wrong with 'em is they burn out and die on you." He laughed.

"It's not funny, it's making me sick, you sonafabitch," Jim said. "I get so mad I could get a gun and just go down the street popping off bartenders."

"You want them all snug? Each one in a little tract house, with a little family of second-class, almond-eyed citizens? Budgeting out the paycheck every week? Is that how you see Nomi? Can you see a fireball like her in it?"

"I can see her now as about a junior in college learning how to cope."

"Her? Are you crazy? She'd tear the eyes out of every dolt cribbing through the classes; she'd burn the education factory down. Look, don't you know a goddess when you see one? All these girls are divine as they stroll in, all brave and excited from their fucked-up villages."

"Why does the army have to put their camps next to the villages?"

"They're scared, of course. The army is terrified of the wilderness. Oh yes, the army is a joke."

"We'll go to hell for doing this," Jim said. "All of us, I know."

"Sure, sure, of course."

"Is it too late?" Jim asked.

"Oh yes. Can you save Nomi? Can the United States save the Eskimo?" The old cobbler chuckled exuberantly. "Quit daydreaming, boy. You came to look at Alaska, not save it. Now get out to the fire station. They're waiting."

"I told Nomi I'd meet her here."

"How long did she say she'd be? You know she's gone her own way."

"Tottering the jukey streets," Jim said.

"Sure now, hurry up, try this on."

Jim put the mended shoe on his foot and tried it out, delaying as long as he could.

"Yes, it's fine, almost as good as new," he had to admit, "but I can't leave. She's expecting me to help."

"You're the one needing help. And she's done all she can. Down there in the willows asuckin' her tit all day, did that help? You got a life all your own. So goddamn you, boy, git amovin'."

"You'd sell her," Jim retorted. "You'd sell her over and over again."

"Sure. Anyone in Alaska would. The priest, the soldier, the poet, we all would, because they're just a bunch of dirty little ignorant, copulating savages."

It was hopeless. She wasn't coming. The fire was burning off on a hill somewhere a thousand miles away, and Nomi was somewhere on Second Avenue, scalding her throat with vodka, laughing with the cozening bartenders, lapping up their souls.

He went out without a thank you, without a goodbye.

He looked up and down the dirty, dumpy street, a boulevard in a wasteland. There were the nylon jacketed, bluejeaned, blackhaired girls promenading, whispering and giggling, but there was none with a red ribbon, none with a head high as Nomi's, none with a laugh pure as hers. He was going to lie down and die right there. He couldn't hold all this broken vase of beauty together in his heart. As a forlorn hope, he went into the Pedro, but the place was empty except for a downcast Don Hennessy seated near a downcast Ernie. A new bartender, who looked like Ernie's drugstore cowboy double, was behind the bar.

"Arblick held the election at four o'clock this morning in the back room of Momma's whorehouse," Don announced, "and guess who won."

"Momma," Jim guessed.

"Right the first time," Don grinned crookedly. "So now I'm looking for a new union to build."

"Wanta unorganized job?" he asked.

"Sure," Don said. "Just so it ain't scabbin'."

"It's legit," Jim said. "C'mon."

"How about me?" Ernie asked, his voice humble and good-natured, "That sonabitchin' cabbage head just fired me."

Jim didn't care, didn't give a damn one way or the other. "It isn't easy, and it's dirty outside work."

"Lead the way," Ernie said.

"Where to?" the cab driver asked.

"400 Noel first, then we'll go from there." Jim kept the final destination secret.

Kitty was washing her hair. Her breasts were swaying beneath a towel draped around her neck when Jim hurried into his room, grabbed up a new bottle of garlic salt and a jacket.

"What's your hurry, Jim?" she asked.

"Got to catch a fire, kid," Jim said.

He pulled the towel aside and bent to kiss her peaked breast, but he froze. Big teeth marks were bruised on the pure skin as if a hobnailed heel had stomped on it.

"Pardon me," he said and brushed the pink cone of her nipple with his tongue. "Nice set of choppers. Nomi's?"

"No," Kitty said quietly. "I'm in love. I can't help it, he's a beautiful, blueblack man, with a beautiful soul and a beautiful name."

"Merriweather," Jim said.

"You know him?" Her eyes were anxious.

"I don't know his soul," Jim said, pushing on by.

"When'll you be back? I want to talk."

"God knows." Then, looking back he saw the misery on her face. He turned, held her tightly in his arms.

"Oh, Jim, what am I going to do?" she cried, "I can't be seen with him even."

He said, "I'm loyal to you. No matter what. That's about all I have."

"You're a sweetie, Jimbo, you're dumb as hell, and bird-legged, but you are nice."

He kissed her nose and went out the door.

"What kept you?" Don asked.

"Love," Jim said. "Now, if it's all right with everyone, let's get out to the fire station."

They knew then what the job was, and they could have refused it. "Gosh, Jim, I can't thank you enough," Ernie said gratefully.

Jim paid the cabbie off and led the way into the office. The chief looked at him, shocked.

"I don't see how you do it, Jim. I just got a call of a fire over on the Canadian border, up by Sadyuiak, right about here." The fire officer put a little flagged pin high on the wall map. "I'm just starting to call in the boys."

"We're ready," Jim said, half smiling. "Turn us loose."

"O.K.," the officer said, pulling out a form. "Next of kin in case of emergency?"

"Frieda Carondelet, 535 Mono Street, Fresno, California."

Ernie had someone in Texas and Don wrote down "none."

Bear would not be along. He had sixty days of street sweeping. He would not get home; his family would go another winter and another summer without him. Blake was already out photographing the annual migration of the caribou and the wolves.

11

DEATH

HURRIEDLY THREE more men were gotten together and into the plane. Not counting Jim, there were Don and Ernie, then Beane, then an old sourdough type of white lush whose enslavement to the Nomi tradition had resulted in his being colorless and featureless. Then another University of Alaska kid with Beane. They were already adopting the gaudy mantle of American collegiate.

What a sad sack, Jim thought, seeing how—even with Don—he was single, a loner. Worst of all, Beane was appointed Fire Boss. All the same, Jim was the timekeeper. He would call their tune.

Looking out for Number One, it was called.

They flew a different direction this time. North, all right, but far east too. There were the great, gashing mountains again, the innumerable rivers, ponds and sloughs, a floating country in danger of sinking in the summer.

Filson was fortunate that when he found the fire, he also found a long stretch of sand and gravel alongside a narrow river upon which he could land. He diligently flew around the little, smoldering hillside, giving orders and directions to Beane. It looked like such a puny fire, Jim knew it wouldn't amount to anything. They would have it ringed and contained in a couple of hours. But Filson was careful and instructed Beane as best he could. After that there was no problem. Filson lowered the wheels of the goose and made a sweet landing on the tilted riverbank.

They unpacked gear, packs and sleeping bags. Filson said he'd drop them more food in the morning, if they needed it, and took off.

As they watched him go south, Don said, "Seems to me there ought to be a higher pay scale for flying. The higher the risk, the greater the pay."

But Beane only snorted, settled his black-rimmed glasses and commanded, "Pack up and we'll get started."

That was a sensible order. They packed up and followed single file as he led them over a steep hillside through dense country. He could lead all right. He was strong and young and in a hurry.

Jim felt relieved. With any luck he'd be back and reach Nomi before she even knew he was gone.

An hour's march brought them to the fire just as the sun was starting to swing below a high ridge to the west.

"Let's eat," young Judge Beane said, bringing out his C-rations.

That was sensible, Jim thought. They heated up their cans of hamburger patties, and ham and lima beans, and the trading started immediately, although Jim was surprised to find that the hamburger was not so valuable with this crew. It took two hamburger patties to trade for one chicken noodle. Somehow it was not taste, it was status, Jim decided, secretly enjoying the hamburger patties and gravy soaked in hard biscuit.

After they ate, Beane was satisfied with the fire, the world and himself. He stood, looked at the little hillside barely smoldering at its edges of moss, and in the cool of the evening said, with a carefree smile, "Well, it doesn't look like much. I could use some shuteye. Let's take a break and pick up a few hours."

Ernie grinned wisely and said, " 'Atta boy!"

Don watched and waited, studying the routine. Jim was shaken. The time to fight fire was to catch it in the cool of the night, before the winds of day arose. But he was not the boss. To hell with it. He was as tired as any of them. He glanced at the calculating Don and lay down on his sleeping bag.

He last recalled Don talking to the old sourdough about bettering working conditions.

They were awakened at dawn by the buzzing of an airplane.

"Look alive, boys," Beane yelled, jerked out of his sleep and guiltily jumping to his feet, fumbling for his walkie-talkie. The others, hearing the commotion, got up from their pallets more slowly and tried to appear to have been up all night long.

"Yes," Beane said into the walkie-talkie, "we got it covered pretty good. But we need a little more time."

"I'll drop three days' rations," Filson replied, circling over the little hillside.

"Right," Beane said. "We'll see you in three days."

Filson threw out the C-rations and flew back toward the west.

"O.K., fellas," Beane said, sighing tiredly, trying a phony, rueful grin. "Let's eat."

Jim was more nervous than ever, but the young, iron-jawed leader set the pace.

After breakfast and coffee, they piled the packs and stores in a burned-over spot of moss safety, and at long last they picked up their tools and started up the oozing, livid fireline.

It was the usual dampish moss, and on the higher slope spruce needles and duff, but by now the great sun was high and hot. As Jim studied the group and the general lay of the burn, he felt a prickle of cold fear. He needed Bear, not Don, who was so carefully keeping track of the procedures.

Don said to Beane, "Seems to me they ought to provide a man with asbestos shoes for this kind of work."

Beane glared at him and demanded, "What are you—an agitator? Some kinda red or something?"

"No, I'm just a worker who thinks his life is worth as much as anyone else's."

"Forget it," Beane said. "It isn't dangerous and if you don't like it, you can walk out."

Don realized there was no point in discussing the matter any further with the future judge.

There was a twisty breeze, but there wasn't a rain cloud anywhere. Jim was last of the group as they worked up the slope. Beane, Kissass Ernie, Sourdough, Collegekid, Don and Jim, single file. Each hacking and digging as they went, six men digging a ditch around a small fire smoldering. It seemed simple enough.

But Jim was terrified. Something was terribly wrong. There was too much smug self-satisfaction. He looked back down the hill. A little flame had blown across the thin line.

"Let's get that," Jim said to Don, and moved back with his Pulaski, as the others continued on up the hill.

Hardly looking back, the other four trudged on up the hill single file, trenching and chopping, blissfully making a ring about a fire that was already moving faster than they were.

Jim let Don know of his fear and carefully cut the new fire spot out with a few strokes of the Pulaski and scattered wet dirt over the embers. Don, in spite of his anxiety, refused to take the essential fact seriously. All he would say was, "C'mon, Jim, don't be an old grandma all your life." But hardly had Jim gotten that fire out than he saw another that had crossed the little fireline between them and the others. He looked worriedly back at the men toiling up the side of the hill. This was bad. This was what Bear had spoken of, and what Blake had warned of in the nights they'd sat around a fire drinking C-ration chocolate. This was bad, to have men on a hill in tricky, hot weather and a fire spreading out below them.

"Goddamn it," Jim grumbled. "Why in hell didn't we put it out last night when it was cool?"

"Aw, I'll get it," Don offered, as if to buck up the faltering Jim.

As he left, Jim said, "Don, maybe you better stick with old grandma. There's something wrong—"

Don grinned his slash of smile and placatingly said, "I'll just knock that little smoke down and be back to hold your hand."

"Wait, Don—"

"I'll just be a minute. Somebody's got to do it."

And he was gone.

"You guys, you guys! You better wait, or get the hell out of the way!" Jim called after Beane, but no one heard him.

They were hypnotized with the smoldering, sometimes flaming line ahead of them. They marched like a line of ants, on up the hill, never bothering to look back.

Don hurried to the jumped fire behind them and went to work on it, waving at Jim as if to buck him up. Jim was a nervous, jittery, eye-skittering coward when it came to fighting fire. It was all right when you had someone like Bear or Blake along, but it was not all right when you were by yourself or with a handful of total idiots. He worked on his own jumped-over patch and watched helplessly, in fear, as he saw more sparks blow across the line between himself and the spread-out line of figures on the hill. Already they were separated. Already he was cut off from them. Even Don was on their end of it now.

It made him feel no better that his position was the safest because he was near the bottom of the hill, because he knew well enough there was no safe place really except in the middle of a good burn. There didn't seem to be that sort of a burn around. The top, mossy surface had been scorched off, but there was plenty of duff and moss underneath to burn again if the day got hot enough. They were, he realized with a sudden, crazy foreboding, right in the midst of a big fire that was only really starting off. And they weren't supported. Filson had believed the lie that they had controlled and suppressed the fire the night before. Filson couldn't foresee that such a simple little five-acre burn would get fouled up. And he wouldn't be back for three days. They were six mortals, already separated, already tied down, in the heart of an uncontrolled fire, and, as he felt the breeze pick up, his heart beat quick and hard.

He looked back up the hill. They were gone. They were hidden in hasty clouds of blowing smoke as the hot sun dried the moss, and the breeze fanned the coals into torches of fire.

"Don! Don! Don!" he yelled in shameless panic. "This way! Dammit, come down here, Don!"

There was no answer from the burning bush.

Wherever he looked, he realized he was lost as much as anyone. It was Jim Carondelet, alone and by himself. A weak mortal surrounded by fire, with coals already scorching the bottoms of his shoes. Suddenly, like magic, it seemed there was fire wherever he looked and the wind was rising up the hill. He had been working his way into a little punchbowl valley surrounded by high, steep slopes, only a few hundred yards from where they had made camp.

"Beane," Jim said aloud. "You stupid shitkicker, you better find those boys a cool spot."

He was sweating from the heat and the effort of finding some protection. His lungs were already hurting from the smoke and shortage of oxygen.

He peered anxiously up the hillside, hoping to catch sight of Don and the others but they were completely obscured in clouding smoke and flame.

"Beane! Damn you! For Chrissakes move down, find a slough, jump in a lake, get the hell off that mountain!"

He was aware that his own situation was equally precarious. He had the horrible feeling that he was sitting on a napalm time bomb. That a maiming, tortured death was springing out of the smoke like wild black blowtorching bulls. He tried to be calm but he was not calm. He was never calm anywhere, and he was barely able to control terror here. His eyes hurt raw from smoke and ash, his feet were hot from coals underfoot as he tried to work lower through the spreading fire. Once he thought he heard a shout or a scream, but the unbelievable thunder of the fire growing like a bomb exploding in slow motion made everything secondary and unreal. On that hillside was only a furious pack of smoke, racing and spouting, and around him was only fire and livid coals with slow, uneasy currents of real air moving through it.

He kept his direction. Billy Bear had told him once, "Always stay below it, never let it get below you," but this was different. There was no below or above any more. The punchbowl was a trap. The real gut knowledge hit him: He was trapped in a fire like a mouse in a basket. Surrounded by mountains which before dark would certainly be aflame, he was scurrying around exactly in the eye of it.

He was running now with a forced steadiness as he explored his cell. It was nearly flat. He couldn't find where a river drained it. Perhaps there was a notch over there in the hottest fire. But that way was closed. The floor of the punchbowl was peat moss, tundra tinder. It was wet underneath, but as soon as the sun hit the surface it was dry as Southern California. How would it go? What sort of wizardry would Bear pull off now? There was no such thing as backfiring; he was already surrounded by gouts of fire, growing larger, higher and hotter. Wherever he looked he could see no farther than a hundred feet. Often, wrapped in solid smoke, he could not see his hand.

And this was only morning. Getting toward noon. Suddenly he didn't know where he was. He'd lost track of direction. Lost track of which slope they'd been climbing, lost track of where the camp had been. Nothing, nothing living whatsoever was going to survive this sonofabitch!

"Goddamn you, Beane, you lazy fucker, you nogood, useless bastards, I wish you'd get down here—"

He was sick now with fear for himself and for the others. The holocaust was happening right before his eyes, right underneath his burning feet. He wondered oddly how long the soles would hang on.

With no place left to go, he used the flat side of his Pulaski to dig a hole in the moss. A spongy wetness was below. He shoved his feet into the damp moss sponge. The coolness was fine, a blessing. He kept his head low. Someone had said the best place in a fire is close to the ground. But someone else had said don't ever try to stay put in a tricky fire, because *it'll gitchew!*

The winds shifted suddenly, revealing the little meadow of moss which was his pen and run. He made himself calculate how it was going to have to be, how he was going to have to last out through the fire by always staying in a burned-over place. As the crazy wind shifted again, driving the flames back across the meadow, he saw that there was no place to hide. The meadow would burn and reburn as the surface of it dried out time after time. It burned like ether, but what difference to a man who burned whether he burned slow or fast? It had to be a running battle, a rat race for survival. He knew it and accepted it on those terms.

There was not much thought after that. Once the winds started cutting back and forth, once the day heated the moss into fragile stuff, touchy as guncotton, he had only himself to give himself to. He ran.

He ran close behind a racing whippet of fire following it, on its heels, directly across the flat, keeping in control until the wind shifted and he ran ahead of it on a diagonal until the wind shifted again and turned the fire around. He followed it back, always keeping a proportion of cooled, burned-over moss between him and the flame. It was a life-or-death balance.

Once he stumbled and the fire touched his clothes as he staggered off ahead of it. He had to beat the spots of smolder from his pants legs while running in birdlegged panic.

There was air though. Perhaps, he reasoned once, the winds were so strong and changeable because they were bringing in the new air to him. Not much, God knows.

He was wearing out. His leg muscles were knotting up. His mind was often blanked out, while he went automatically in the right direction at the right time.

The fire in his ears was thundering, actually thunder clapping and rattling, whooshing with a heavy rhythm exactly as if it it were a long, fast freight train hammering through an echo-chamber canyon. The train smacked the air with blows and crashes. Sometimes, through whorls of gray and black smoke, he would see the high mountainsides falling under the direct beat of the flames.

"Jesus! Jesus! They've got to do something—but they'll do nothing for three days. The people who reported it think it's being fought, and no one but me knows it is lost! It is lost!"

He was stumbling and falling too often. He was not trained to run back and forth before dogdevils of fire all day long.

He heard off to his left a succession of small explosions, as if someone were shooting, but he couldn't cross over the burning barrier to get to what he thought was help, and no help crossed to him.

Several times he tried escaping from the punchbowl. Once on the hillside itself, out of the deep bed of moss, the ground was deep with live coals. A Subu or Fakir might cross them barefooted but whatever good would it do to wade through a mile of live coals? Suppose the next mile were live coals too? Or suppose it weren't. Where he was, no matter the frantic, roundabout pace, the inconsequential directions he ran, *just keeping his true proportion with death,* was safety as long as he lasted, was life, existence, being. When he slipped on the baked corpse of a rabbit, he saw the connection.

The burned teeth snapped at him. The fried eyes cried. The stewed guts hung long on his toe. He ran on as incendiary gusts whipped into the bowl.

His breath came heavily and painfully, aching into his side. The hurt made him limp. His feet were blistered. His hair and eyebrows and the hair on his hands were singed. Sometimes now, in desperation, he had to simply dive down into the moss and suck in a cool breath of air until the wind would change again and drive him back.

How many times he crossed that little valley! He was certain he had stepped on every inch of it at one time or another. Several times he came upon the strewn-out dead rabbit; each time he was surprised, thinking he was somewhere else. Above him the hot winds howled, the fire smashed up the high slopes, leaving a flat wake of glowing coals.

Time was gone. He was only a mouse in a frying pan scuttling here and there, cursing all the way, refusing ever to make a peace with god or devil, refusing ever to admit a metaphysical need, or any emotion other than rage and fear. No sympathy for Beane and Ernie, Don, or any of the rest.

"Oh, fuck them all, the bastards! They want to sleep, all right! O.K., boys, it's a long sleep!"

The footing was bad. He was scrabbling slower. He was gone beyond endurance and knew it.

—Oh, sure, sure, boys, I know what you're all going to say. If he had just dug a trench around himself, worked it out gradually, he'd have had a cozy little island in the middle of it. But doesn't anyone but me know what it is to be caught in a bog of peat moss that burns according to the wind? That it is afire like pages of a book burning one at a time? If I can just get past the colophon, boys, maybe I'll write a textbook on firefighting.

He could remember once the cool composure of his wife's face. He could remember the dark lightness of Nomi's face. Coughing up char and smoke, he could hear and feel her own coughing of life, and he could remember Bear, a shambling bum, sweeping the streets and somewhere far away, the little family gaily waving at an airplane going overhead, hardly thinking of the prospect of winter when it would be sixty below with only frost to breathe and very little fish to eat.

He could remember Kitty, her ratrace from man to man and woman to woman, a little Negro and slim klooch; he could remember Joe trying to look out for Number One, in quicksand, plugging away, working, seeking to make equilibrium.

He could remember how they had slept the cool night through until it was too late.

O, I would rather run this race than die in fear and fire. I would rather light a candle than curse the dark.

He managed to hang onto the Pulaski, that was all. The pack, the garlic salt, everything but the Pulaski was gone.

Toward the end of the long day, when the sun actually disappeared behind the mountains, he stumbled blindly on a further route. The winds were cooler and steadying. They were less threatening, but he had not the slightest idea of what to do or where to go. He was only a mite in a smelter.

He slipped into a tiny web of water which seemed to have direction. As the wind and fire permitted, he followed the bit of water, wading into it when the fire was still smoldering deeply on the edges, and having crossed a wide barrier of burning coals this way, he found the notch which he'd long ago reasoned must be somewhere. It led in turn to a lower swamp.

A cool, wet swamp, dark now. Wet, icy cold, how could it be? He was sweated out, aching, worn out. He had to rest.

On a small hummock of burned-over permafrost which was as close to ice as it could be, with his legs in a puddle of icy water, he huddled beside a fire. At least he was warm on one side.

But a misery came over him as a thick murky smoke lowered into the near-freezing swamp.

His bones cracked. His soul was painful.

After a few minutes of lying on the icy ground resting his sour red wretched eyes, he had to get up and look. He hurt all over. He was even hungry. But the pains of spirit were more pressing. He stood with a deep groan and looked up and around him.

The sun was gone. It was almost a real night in burning-leaf autumn. There was no moon nor stars visible through the blanket of smoke, but the mountains about him were glowing like the pits of hell. Wherever he looked were great acreages of rosy coals glimmering and glowing, scintillating, stabbing. He was still surrounded and trapped. As he watched, he could see an occasional tall tree suddenly catch in the top, flare brilliantly for an instant and disappear in the night again.

Where were Beane and the bunch? Where did they sleep tonight?

He didn't care much any more whether he lived or died.

A five-acre patch of smoldering duff had, in twelve hours, spread to twenty or thirty square miles. A million acres. Where would it stop? Certainly this advent of night would only hold it still until morning.

He coughed the smoke from his lungs and spat on the cold, melted permafrost. He looked into the high fires around him, trying to think of an escape. Yes, the swamp here would be firefree. There was water everywhere. But he couldn't wait out a whole day in muck while far on the mountainside the huge spruce flamed like torches in the darkness and fell. He crawled closer to his fire and tried to rest. Tried not to think.

Et puis, et puis encore. M'sieu Baude, nature as nature is not so awfully goddamned boring. Fuck you and your ennui. Screw your spleen. You sit around on your dead ass in the middle of a city complaining about something outside of the city—

He dozed fitfully, awakening to find darkness still. His legs were locked in pain. He moaned like an animal. Like an animal, hungry, wet, cold, burned, he dragged himself on further into the swamp until he knew there was no way out. That was why it was a swamp. There was no way out.

He looked blearily at the burning mountains. There was no way out.

He thought of camp. There might be something there. Maybe everyone is in at camp, waiting for me.

In a daze he staggered through the ice water out of the swamp, back into the cool, mossy meadow he had covered all day long and tried to remember where camp was. He couldn't. But still trying to stick to business, he staggered on, yelling in a cracked, crazy loon voice.

"Hey! Yoo hoo, here I am! C'mon, boys, let's not carry this game too far. Yoo hoo! Yoo hoo! Hey, Beane, here comes the old timekeeper. Yoo hoo. Yoo hoo—I'm in free—give me a yell, boys! It's all over. Boys, it's been a hell of a day, boys, but we licked it—Yoo hoo! Yoo hoo!"

As he roamed the perimeter of the mossy valley where somewhere the camp had been, he had visions of wandering over a dead battlefield: black snags, distorted trees, extinct bushes, ash powder underfoot. All lighted by the rising and falling glow from the mountains, reflecting their red light down into his punchbowl.

In time he found what had been their camp. There was no one there.

There were only the unburnable tins of C-ration cans which had burst as the fire swept over them. There was nothing really left. He opened a can of biscuit, but the biscuit was ash. There was no food, it had been exploded and cremated. Four cases of C-rations reduced to ash. He could hardly believe it. The sleeping bags and canvas packs, of course, but now no food either. No food or shelter in the icy-cold night. No igloo. No jacket. Nothing but himself and a Pulaski. He could keep warm. But there was an end to that after a while. One must eat.

Searching through the debris, hoping that something might have been shielded enough to be preserved, he found a couple of charred cans, maybe worth carrying. He studied the hills aglow and chose a course. He was possessed by a desperate clarity that he must get somewhere to a pure refuge, before it all started again. No matter how tired he was, how much he ached, how slow he moved, he had to find a sanctuary.

All the horizon glowed through the constant smoke blanket, but he picked a path with his eye out of the punchbowl, over the side of a mountain. Stowing the two cans in his pocket, he scoured a bit of burned chicken-and-noodle out of a blown-up can into his mouth and started up the line of retreat.

Staggering, hurting and moaning a little sigh on every breath as it burned his throat, his eyes half shut and raw, he pushed up the hillside to he knew not where. Once in a while he would stop, cup his hands to his mouth and yell "Yoo-hoooo," but there was never an answer.

O life, I love, I will not ever frown again, I will not ever weep again, I will not ever put it down, O life, the flame of us, to be burned in pleasure, in art.

"Where there's smoke, there's fire," he kept murmuring to himself, and remembered Bear saying of Sonofgod, "Much smoke and little fire." And Rimbaud, "A season in hell."

—O wife wife wife, here I am. O here I am, in the middle of the Arctic, lost in fire, lost of comrades—who could be so stupid, who could be so fucked up? I. I, James B. Carondelet, am so fucked up. Fuck six. Beane and five. Numbers. Don, the incendiarist radical. I only flew awhile with them. They'd rather sleep than do the motion. O woman, O every woman who ever felt compassion for me . . . Why not us all, all mankind, mankind, why not? Why not us all?—

His left leg, slightly weaker than the right, was dragging, the toe of his left shoe digging a furrow, slow, an ungainly stagger like a lame vulture, so ignoble, so tired.

Wherever he looked were patches and low banks of fires. Glowing coals ate at his old shoes. His breath was short and slow. There was nothing to him but a will to move. Coming to a point of solid rock, suddenly, for no reason at all, a gaseous surge of flame rushed at him. He fell into the rock and his mind was blank, as if dead.

Some time later when he looked up, a little group of trees was burned and gone, but even as he stood again, a big, old tree to his left, its roots burned, fell in a shower of sparks and flame directly at him.

He ran across beds of burning coals to escape. He reached a hot line of rocks and fell. He was rolling. He clutched and grabbed fire. He let go and fell more. He rolled into a nest of nettles unburned. He lay still and groaned.

Where he lay was warm and soft, for a while he couldn't think of anything better. Then he remembered life. Oh yes, life, well, life would not be nested here come day. He got to his knees and on to his sore, sad feet and ambled now down a different hill.

O, much easier, amazingly, at long last, out of the burn where there was some fresh fragrance of green spruce which would certainly be smoke tomorrow. Angling across in near darkness, he tottered as far as he could go without direction or intent, except to find a sanctuary.

As the sun pulled its circle around the eastern mountains, he saw a glistening blue below. Ah yes. He stumbled, fell, let roll heedlessly. It was what he wanted. A cool, clear blue.

Yes, like his wife's eyes. He rolled and stumbled, kicked and kneed and fell, and kited and rolled directly into a large, blue lake where water birds flew.

He never knew how long he lay on the shore of the blue lake. Somewhere a freight-train fire was blasting hot and high, but not here. In total exhaustion he twitched and yelped on the dry, warm sand, as sleep washed through his ravaged loon nerves.

A scream, a terror-stricken cry. The black water bird with its red-slashed throat shrieked for the torture of six assorted men by fire, wailed for Nomi kicking and biting, excoriated Jim huddled in evaporating stupor. He heard the mad-woman's scream. It blended perfectly with the condition of his sleep.

Later, when all that was left of him was a tired and hungry and gutted-out beanpole, he jumped and twitched awake when he heard the bird blare again. Looking out upon the blue-eyed lake, he saw the black loons swimming nervously. Remember? Now remembering back on how it had been, wondering how long he'd slept, what day or week it was.

Where was Filson? When? Then he remembered the other five. Pallbearers come by sixes. What could he do? What should he do?

The country was vast, the fire enormous. It leaped and thundered for miles and miles and still going, but it was turned away and cut off from his lake.

The paint had been scorched off the C-ration cans and they were light. But he wasn't an eating man anyway. He could go a long time on nothing. He put the unopened cans in a tree crotch near his little green glade by the splashing lake. And with his Pulaski, he cleared a space around, making it larger so Filson could see. He set up a signal fire on the open, sandy beach where it couldn't get loose once he lighted it. Maybe in a couple, three days. He realized he should have kept track of the time.

He'd already forgotten how long he'd fought to live through the fire. Forgotten how long it took to drag over the ridge and scramble tumbling to his sanctuary; had no idea of how long he'd lain asleep, his shoes off, his feet blistered and twitching.

But now, as he splashed the cold lake water on his dirty, singed face, he knew he had to make a search for his fellow men. Someone might be burned and hurt. Even that stupid, incompetent Beane might have sprained his brain.

Jim scratched at the ash chafing into his skin, looked into the blue sky and saw the brown, dirty smoke making the sun sepia. O what fire burns to make that shade of sky?

Yes, he had to move. He looked at his red blistered feet, and reluctantly slipped on ashy stockings and his desiccated shoes, carefully and precisely putting them on his tender feet. But it was not the shoes that held him, it was the reluctance to leave to go back into the blaze and burn. Once was enough. But still, he was no dandy waiting for something to happen.

Once his shoes were on, there was nothing else to hold him. He could find his camp again, a camp consisting of two charred unidentified cans of something, hopefully chocolate or powdered milk and chewing gum.

As he climbed back up the hill, something bothered the swimming loons. They screamed their bloodcurdling cries several times after him, and once he turned and yelled back.

"Aw, shut up, you brotherfuckers!"

He ached in every joint but he wasn't tired. All he needed was a little exercise to oil his knees. Keeping a close watch on landmarks so that he wouldn't miss the lake again, he moved on over the ridge. As he walked he gashed and blazed every available tree. It was vital to him to come back to the lake.

Once on the ridgeback, where the burn had stopped, he had a long view of the enormous burn. Everywhere beyond were only blacks and browns. Not a leaf of green had survived. Even the ever renewable moss was dusky brown. Where had the crew first started? Once he knew where that was, he could probably figure where Beane and Don and the others had gone. Chances are they would come back to the old camp for rations. He would go back there first.

It was a long way, but the fire was far away. In the distance great sheets of smoke tore into the sky, but there wasn't enough left to burn here. There was nothing left to burn at all. All was burned and dead and black and brown.

Yes, try camp. That's where they should rendezvous. He strolled along. It seemed easy now. There were a few patches of live coals smoldering in deep duff, but there was no hurry, no trouble. He could see the whole thing, mile after mile of nothing.

He moved along across the face of the hill until he realized he was on the same slope they had been on when the fire broke loose and the winds split. Far below was the camp and over to the left was the punchbowl. How clear it seemed now. The punchbowl, a twenty-acre barren mass of gray, brown moss, surrounded. Yes, there had been no way out, and it was the only place to have been unless someone had scented the blue lake and run headlong for it while there was time. Time. Timekeeper Carondelet on the job. His watch had cooked at a quarter to three. He searched the opposite slopes, through the notch to the cold, wet swamp. There was no sign of life except a few swallows and eagles. Horseflies were miraculously coming back.

Not at camp, punchbowl or swamp. He'd best bear up the middle of the steep slope where he'd last seen them. They were no doubt just over the hill on a nice slough catching fish and having a snooze. But he was troubled. If he knew Don, he at least would have come back to find Jim; the others would have come back to camp for the rations. They were eaters. They were hamburger-patties-and-gravy and chicken-and-noodle men.

With a qualm traceable to the loon screams which had frightened him, were piercing enough to raise the dead actually, he pushed on up the hill. It was hard walking and his strength was diminishing. The ashes were cold. He must have slept a long time. Maybe they had come to camp and gone again while he slept. But no tracks. He was praying for their health and happiness against the dark misgivings that built with his every step. He had seen them, sleepily prowling up the fireline, and Don all cocky and heroic and arguing about extra pay for extra risks, to each according to his need. "We'll get this back here, Beane," and no one had even bothered to acknowledge. Yes, Beane had looked around wisely, with authority, and nodded, but behind that authority was a panty-raiding vacuum. Jim had watched them toiling up the slope, bored and detached, thinking probably about their checks mounting—then Don had been noble.

The hair on his neck began to crawl as he remembered them disappearing behind an uplifting screen of smoke from the shifting wind.

"Oh now come on, Jimbo, you're the happy fellah, you ain't a doomster now, maybe if we look a little farther and yell a bit."

He recalled his cracked and ghastly yoo hoos and he couldn't yell. It was too irreverent. They would no doubt be just over this ridge.

He was passing through standing timber burned black and naked, a thousand telephone poles on the side of a mountain, footed in white, soft ash. And at a slight sigh of a breeze three of them turned and crashed across his path.

"Ol' widdermakers," he spoke to the trees through the cloud of pulverized ash, "you got to have a silver bullet to get me."

But he hurried. There would be a lot of them falling as the fire coals gnawed their roots out of the permafrost. The ridge top was a rocky, bare granite spine. Off in the distance, miles away, the fire billowed up its tarry smoke.

"My God, Beane, you're not up there fighting that, are you?" Jim asked, knowing that nothing but the thundering freight train of flames lived there.

Ahead of him there was no movement. Nothing lived beyond in the burn. He had to go on. Now most reluctant, now afraid, now sick with apprehension of disaster.

When he found them, he knew he had known it all along, but so beguiling was mind that it could deny a truth so obvious.

They were scattered, and there was little left of them. He picked up nothing, touched nothing. His tracks through the white ash were virgin.

They had been hit by a sheet of flame that had stunned them and killed them as they had been in line. There at the head was no doubt Beane, nothing much more than a sprawled sandpainting of a human lying in a bed of ash, nothing except perhaps a bit of bone, teeth, bullhead belt buckles, metal things.

He didn't touch them. The five forms were marked into the ash by a different, blacker, greasier color and tone. Yes. He walked the line and counted five spaces. Five patches of color richer than spruce ash.

Sleep a long sleep, Beane, you bastard, Jim thought without emotion. "Don, I'm sorry," he said aloud to the nearest form.

Here they lay. The adventurers, the gold seekers, the treasure hunters, the radicals and freedom finders, the klooch fuckers. Ah, poor Dorthy Butterball. . . . Well, there was nothing left for the wolves, no barbecued long pig. Just white man's metal survived him. Jim felt an awe, not a sickness. How hot the fire burns. How clean a way to die. How sad a boy so young should breathe down flame and fall as chunk wood into fuel.

Again his mind, before a spell of total madness smacked him, urged him to act. To do something. Here were five men dead, lost in the middle of a wasteland. What should be done?

One marks the dead. Of course, the Eskimos don't but they are a static society, they don't know nothing and have no place to go. They get rid of their dead and make no markers nor make any recollection other than perhaps to give the new dead's name to newborn, but let the bears eat the dead, let the ice carry the dead south to white man's sea, let the dead be disappeared, and keep the homefires burning.

"Ai yuh, ai-yuh . . . Kanuckanuckpuk!"

Jim caught himself. Sure, they have to be marked. The Pulaski heads were forged blue. They were permanent. A shovelhead or two survived, they could always be found. But that wasn't enough.

"H'mm, h'mm," he began talking to himself. "Now then, Filson is going to have to see, maybe haul in a box of ash and teeth to make the bookwork tally true. Yes, so now the world is watching, waiting for you to do something besides moan and cry. . . ."

Jim dragged in a big black log and pulled it down into the fluffy ash, near the cremations. He laid it on a parallel line with Beane's form and climbed back up for another tree. This one happened to be shorter. He had trouble with its foot of roots hanging into the roots of others but after a steady, patient and exhausting tug of war, he managed to wrestle the second log down and lay it across the first. The large black cross should be easily visible from the air. Filson had eyes like a condor. He would see it.

The thing is, would he see Jim too? Jim was not staying. He had enough of death.

"Fuck 'em and feed 'em fish. Screw 'em all but five," he said. "Oh shit. O Jesus Christ, have mercy on them. They were just a bunch of dumb bunnies in a crazy world and didn't know any better. Had no chance. . . ." He realized he was lying . . . they all had had a chance to know better.

Disgusted with his sentimental self, sick at heart with fresh death and loon cries, he turned back, carrying his trusty Pulaski, the boy scout of the new world.

Et puis, et puis encore?

Back to the lake, eat something, wait. He had no idea where he was. He supposed if he walked far enough, he'd find a river and build a raft and, floating down the river, eventually he'd hit a village. But it was too vague to consider. Filson would be back. Every three days he came back, come hell or high water.

My God, he thought, how hot that flame was to reduce a couple hundred pounds of flesh into ash. They had been caught in deep, dry stuff, and had died on top a woodshed under the whippings of the wind. . . . O, now he remembered the scream he'd heard and wanted to forget. . . . O hell, he wanted to forget it . . . and it would never get any smaller, would always increase in volume and terror every time it re-echoed in memory.

A half a mile and they'd have made the ridge, another half a mile and they could have been sitting around bitching and sleeping. Now they wouldn't be bitching. How much a nothing they were. Maybe really, honest and truly, they weren't at all. Maybe he was only insane, had imagined the five alive, and now imagined the five as dry grease spots on an ashy snowfall. No matter, no matter, it is insanity to reconsider it.

He limped on his raw feet over the ridge and eased slowly down that slope through the sweet spruce smell to the lake shore camp. Now he was alone. Now he was Jim Carondelet, timekeeper.

He lay down by the lake on a bed of moss. He shut his eyes for a minute to make a division between life and death, space and time, then and now, true or fake, and looked upon the pure calm of the blue lake.

Never had there been a more romantic and picturesque lake. All it needed was a trapper's cabin at the other end with a stone chimney and a rosy glow coming from the windows to make it the great American myth.

The loon scream splintered his reverie, his eyes jerked open and he saw the black birds skittering nervously, their heads and necks jerking and anxious about him.

O what a delight to open up a can of no label. He was sure it would be chocolate, although it could be those horrible, stale cookies, but even a cookie would taste good now. It was possible there might be hardtack instead, but why be pessimistic, boy, that chocolate was going to be really terrific. O man, man, man, chocolate—he could hardly wind out the strip of tin sealing the can, his fingers were so thrilled with the thought. But he kept at it. He shut his eyes, hoping to inhale a breath of the chocolate as it escaped the tin, and as he wrenched off the lid, he luxuriously allowed himself a moment of not looking. And gradually, as if awakening at home in a silky bed, he let his eyes drift out upon the can. No. Not chocolate. His dream was splitting. Yes. O for Christ's sake, goddamn sonofabitch—yes it was a can of cigarettes. O sure, sure, sure. I sure. Natch.

He tossed the can aside. He wasn't mad. He was sick of the whole routine. He wanted to be home in bed with his wife asleep and warm and his feet not hurting.

Asleep like Beane, ah no; he opened his eyes, ah, no thanks. The fire I breathe comes in my eyes and ears.

What was in the other can? You see James B., where there's hope there's life.

He opened the second scorched can without emotion. He didn't even sniff it or look at it. He simply emptied the contents into his hand. There was the round pack of dehydrated chocolate and four stale cookies with creme filling.

"You see, Jim," he said, "it's Zen."

He sipped at the can of chocolate he brewed over his little fire and nibbled at the rancid cookie. Now sanity. Now chocolate and cookie and sanity. One must make some conception of what is to be.

The sun was sinking in its spiral, behind the ridge. Darkness was coming and with it the cold of the late season. He had no jacket or blanket any more, his clothes were scorched lace. His feet were too tender to walk on. He could go crawl his way to the fire pallbearers, and sit through the dark night with them, and as he considered such event, the scream of the cutthroat loon chilled the quiet of the scene. Sooner or later Filson will come.

He dragged in a few big logs for his fire. He examined his shoes. Mercifully they had held together. The cobbler had done a good job. If those shoes had split, and his feet failed in the punchbowl, there would certainly be six instead of five greaseboys.

"And I don't even have a belt buckle. I guess they'd find my Pulaski head somewhere and say, well, that's Jim, or all that's left of crazy, comical Jim."

But the shoes, the lowly, cowhide brogans, so well oiled and sewn by old Mr. K—— had got him through it. As his campfire blazed cheerily in the night by the lapping lakeshore where fish leaped at flies and small birds cried, he burrowed into a heap of dry peat moss he'd gathered and slept again.

Something soft and creepy whispering across his face awakened him. There was a rosy flickering looping-the-loop glow on top of his face as he opened his eyes in the dark night. A frost chill was on the ground and he shivered dismally and helplessly, even as he stared at the gray glow fading away from him and then appearing again like a silver fox gently whipping through the sky, a fluorescence, a spectral mockery, a faint, crackling sibilance, as if a ghostly woman were mocking him, teasing him into her room. The light weaved new patterns in the cold darkness. He couldn't believe it, and being alone, he again blamed it on madness, since there was nothing to relate it to.

It took him a few minutes of anxious waiting for whatever was next before he defined it as aurora borealis, and once he decided that's what it was, even as he studied with simple wonder the beautiful color, the cold night, the exciting movements of his friend, he went to sleep again.

He awakened at dawn to the whack of a beaver chunking the water with his tail. A moose stood on the opposite shore, knee-deep in water. Jim watched as the beaver swam with steady purpose, going out for breakfast. The flat tail smote the water occasionally, like a drumbeat announcing the coming of Mr. Beaver, Head Damkeeper, and Jim thought, in line of things not needest most, I need a moose like a beaver needs a hat.

The moose ignored the beaver as it munched on the waterlilies. Its great shoulder would feed a man a month or two, its enormous chewy lip would make the greatest sneer of all time. The beaver passed by the moose, decided he was too big to handle, swam a lovely, cutting line back toward his end of the lake, satisfied that everything was either too big to handle or too little to bother with. He would get back to chewing birch saplings.

A big brown bear, nearly as tall as Jim at the shoulder and outweighing him four to one, lazily explored the sandy beach. His coat was chestnut sorrel, and shone with glossy highlights. It was his place, his time, his summer, and he carried all of it under his shining fur. Poking along the edgewater like a giant carefree beachcomber, the brown bear moved way, disappearing into the rich undergrowth.

"Up and at 'em, Jimbo," he said to himself or to the moose, or bear, or the near-dead fire he had frozen by all night. The bright sun was most welcome. It was late, but welcome. Its heat was the gentlest caress. It slipped in through his black ashy clothes to his skin, and through the wrinkles and rib bones into his middle, feeding him. There was nothing left to eat. There was no place to go.

Jim laid up the spruce logs into the bed of coals again and pulled wet birch branches off the trees and laid them close by.

Now for breakfast: Pink grapefruit? Brandied cherries? Baba au rhum? There was nothing. And the more he thought of nothing, the hungrier he felt.

He poked around the moose trails, until he saw the bear track. It was as big as his own foot and twice as wide. It was fresh. A nine-foot brown bear was loose. A six-foot white beanpole was in the cage. Hunger was great. It gave you a sense of humor, better than pot, and you couldn't be sent to jail for it. Somehow they hadn't made a law yet prohibiting or punishing hunger.

Only it made you dizzy.

"Get the hell away from that bear trail," he said to the big sky and the blue-eyed, unrippled lake.

He looked for blueberries but their season had passed. There were plenty of slender, delicate wild roses growing. From some piece of useless memorized lore, he recalled the value of the rose hip as a survival food. He ate a few. They tasted uninteresting and unfilling, sour even to a starving man.

What else? Moss? Leaves? Catch a beaver? Moose? Bear? Stay away from the moose and bear. That big bear would laugh a loud ha ha at his little Pulaski in his bonestick armswing; the moose would give him a ride like no rollercoaster, and the wilderness would first starve him to make him mad, and mad, destroy him. But Filson would come.

Filson, he realized, is probably blowing his check in the Pedro bar and Nomi is sitting alongside, drunker'n owl shit, giggling like a happy Buddha.

He munched at the rose hip as he rambled slowly along the beach.

Fine lake, just the right size. About a half mile across, cold as hell, and pure blue. Freeze in winter, but the fish would be under the ice. The great spruce trees would hang with snow like picture postcards of yule greetings: "And an angel came, saying fear not."

"Look, Miss angel, baby doll, let's have some service"—"French, Thousand Island, Roquefort or Extreme Unction?"—"Just the soup please."—"Pot d'fir or cold roast?"—"Jesus Christ, give me a choice!"

"Filson, you drunken sonofabitch, put down the platter of ham and eggs and hot sweet rolls and get the hell out on the job."

Jim loved the lakeside as much as the bear. Its little beaches were warm, and the lapping of the tiny waves made him sleepy. He could stay here for years if it wouldn't change. But the feeling of autumn was in the air; soon it would be sixty below. Soon life would go underground. Soon something had better happen. He was drowsy in the warm sunshine on the beach. He could sleep, rest, die dripping into the earth, and freeze like a custard.

Sleeping toward dying, he was stretched out on a slim piece of warm lakeside when he heard the beebuzz drone. He jumped to his feet and ran back toward his camp. The drone came close, and even as he looked up, there came the goose across the other side of the lake.

Filson would never see him! The beanpole ran as the plane flew, one weighing against the other in a curious balance.

"Oh, goddamn," he was groaning in terror. "Old sleepy Jim, you gonna get yo' ass in a sling now. That old Filson goin' back and say they done disappeared and here I am!"

He tore through the wild roses and birch clumps until he reached the camp. He could still hear the plane, but it had disappeared over the ridge. The engine sound changed to a tighter, tougher pitch as Filson searched lower. Jim shoved the dry logs of his smoldering campfire together and quickly threw on his pile of birch branches and leaves. He hoped there would be a sudden smudge easily seen, but his fire was small, the sky infinite. Some smoke went up. Thank God there was no wind.

God let there be no wind. His green birch streamed blue smoke heavenward in a pure column. Jim ran out on his tiny clearing by the shore and waited, listening. Over the ridge Filson was gunning his engines, looking low, one way or another.

The pure smoke rose high into the cool blue air. What sacrifice was it? he asked himself, Whose? What? What principle burns? Whose body? Ah, those questions.

He waited, almost hopeless. His boughs were plentiful, the smoke still blue and wet and thick, rising in a pure column, but if that dumbhead Filson couldn't see it, then no one could see it.

He heard the engine lift a note, and a tearing sound as the plane banked up into climbing steep turn, coming back over the ridge, toward him. Him, James B. Carondelet, firefighter, timekeeper, survivor. Rose hipster.

The goose seemed to barely clear the ridge and then drop heavily into his little valley hanging close to the terrain.

"Goddamn it," he said, "don't crash that sonofabitch now!"

But Filson kept in low, five feet above the spruce trees, and Jim started waving his blackened rag of shirt and jumping up and down like a crazy cheerleader, yelling, "Looky here! Here! Here! Here! Looky me!"

The engines thundered in his ear. He ducked as the heavy plane drove at him through the column of smoke, and as the plane passed, he saw the wings waggle.

She came in on a cloud of spray. The moose was running like an army tank. The bear was erect and implacable in his forest. The loons had flown. The beaver was lurking in his den. Filson taxied slowly toward Jim, as if knowing it would be tough titty to have a trivial accident just here and now.

The plane pressed its nose in the spongy moss bank. The engines stopped. Filson came out of the forward hatch with a line. He hopped into the sudden stillness with his own wake beating in on the beach and tied the line to a little tree with a casual half hitch. He turned to Jim almost in the same loose, casual motion.

"I saw your arrow," he said. "Where are the rest?"

Jim had to have a second to understand. "It wasn't an arrow," he said, "it was a cross."

"What? What the hell are you mumbling about?" Filson said. "Where's Beane and the rest?"

He was not the blithe flyboy now.

"Five of 'em and me. Six. Fuck 'em all but six you know." Jim grinned. "I don't know what it means, it's so screwed up, but it means something, the five of 'em all burned up over there at the cross and me alive. You see, it's exactly bass ackwards. I don't just figure out its meaning, but by God, it does mean."

Filson bore with him. He heard the story of the days and nights of running and plodding, of escaping and not escaping, as Jim rambled it off, not asking for food because he couldn't eat, and not asking for sympathy because he was saved, only trying to remain lucid enough to tell Filson.

"Let's go," Filson said. "Show me."

"Yes," Jim said. "Of course."

He got to his feet and started to lead off. But Filson saw the condition of his shoes and said, "Let me see." Jim didn't argue. With grim tears in his eyes, he pulled the stiff leather off his feet.

"You stay," Filson said. "I can find it."

He stooped and lifted Jim in his arms and carried him over to the bow of the plane.

"Crawl on in," he said. "Sit in the co-pilot's seat."

Jim complained strongly, "I want my shoes and my Pulaski. I have to have them."

Filson carried the stiff leather scaps and the Pulaski over to the hatch and tossed them inside. He turned away leaving Jim still lying on the bow of the craft by the open hatch.

What better? It was sunny and warm there. Inside would be the other world of grease and machinery and comfy. Let the sun and metal warm him and forget. He wanted just to be still and lose everything except the lovely sunny day on this pure and unknown lake.

When Filson returned, his black and ashy face was tight, almost angry. He demanded, as an accusation, "How did you do it?"

"What?" Jim asked, knowing it would have been so much simpler if he had burned up too, then there would be no truth on the tragedy, only a benediction, a romantic blessing. Everyone could have gone to bed with a satisfied feeling from the heroic fairy tale of how all six had perished.

"Screw it," Jim said. "I was through another big fire, remember? With Bear and Blake. I knew you shouldn't sleep away the first night and fuck around with a lingering breakfast coffee and cigarette."

"Shut up. They never slept," Filson said. "You better have a simple story and stick to it."

He moved Jim on into the plane and shoved the bow off the beach into deep water. He clambered through the hatch and on up through the cargo space to his seat. The plane was adrift on the lake.

"Nice place," Jim said.

"Yeah," Filson said. "Now, mister, start thinking. How come you ran out on those guys?"

"Oh," Jim said softly. "Oh, oh, oh."

They fouled the water with oil droppings and thunderous wash and then were airborne, lifting with a lovely motion up over the land which was burned black and brown and ashen white. The thunder of the engines prohibited speaking. Jim shut his eyes.

And at the end of a dream, the plane was landing on the blacktop. Filson taxied to his parking spot and cut the engines, a cold, waiting silence.

"Well?" he demanded.

"We went forth as we should to fight the fire. After an all-night battle, we had it ringed. We were working near the top of the rock ridge when all of a sudden Beane—no, Don Hennessy—saw this sudden big wind whip up and come against us. 'Over the side,' Don yelled, but no one heeded as they stuck to their duty on the fireline. But Don knew it was only a matter of seconds and he grabbed me and threw me over the ridge so I rolled clear just as a sheet of flame was blown out of the burn area right into their white teeth."

"Pretty, good," Filson said. "Tone it down a little, though. Somebody might think you're being humorous."

"O.K," Jim said. "Look, Filson, I don't mind. It's no skin off my ass how they died. Of course, they did die brave as hell. Everybody does."

"Yeah," Filson said, "Just so they didn't sleep that first night."

"Of course," Jim said angrily. "They worked like troopers twenty-four hours straight." His tone changed to a triumphant sarcasm. "In fact, I had been going for several days and nights, twenty-four hours a day, fighting the fire and all, and besides, too, I lost a lot of my own personal, valuable equipment."

"Like what?" Filson asked.

"Oh, well, you know, garlic salt, and—"

"Make it out for two hundred hours, I'll okay it."

"It was closer to two-fifty," Jim said.

"All right," Filson said, chocking the wheels and going toward a pickup truck. "Come on."

As they drove toward headquarters, he only said, "Maybe I should be sympathetic with you, but I'm sympathetic with Beane and those others. They lived here. You're just passing by for the quick loot, that's all."

"Filson," Jim said, coming out of his hunger, "do you know I'm sorrier for those dumb shits than anyone? I know how it was with them, and you can shove your goddamned 250 hours."

Filson didn't reply. He drove on down the chuckholed road.

At the fire station Jim repeated his story before a stenographer and the head of the station who listened grimly, knowing the mountains of paperwork which would follow. Thank God they had died in the best tradition. That was worth something.

Jim signed. Filson knew where to find the ash and bone and teeth. They left him. They left him on the steps, nobody saying goodbye. He had his shoes on again and though the pain cut into his raw feet, he was damned if he'd give an inch.

"Ride to town?" someone said as he eased along the neat road.

"I'll make it," Jim said. But looking up at the truck he saw it was Blake speaking. Blake's blond, knowing face. Blake knew at least that a man who survived was still an equal.

"Yes," he said. "I thank you."

He got into the truck on his knees and pulled himself up into the seat, tears in his eyes.

"Blake, you're a fucking ox, but I love you," he said.

"Rough trip," Blake said, putting the truck onto the bumpy road.

"I thank you for teaching me how to do the simple job."

"Not me," Blake said. "You're so ruddy jittery you never sleep within miles of smoke. I always liked having you around. I knew you'd wake me long before any fire jumped our way."

"They wouldn't listen," Jim said. "They were five to one, and they were paying no attention to me."

"So they slant the truth a little."

"Sure," Jim said. "I don't mind that. Honest. I don't. Just because I know the truth doesn't make me vindictive. Give the sonsabitches everything they can get. But why pick on me?"

"Have to pick on somebody."

"O.K. Pick on Filson then. He put Beane on as boss. He gave the directions. I didn't even hear them."

"Filson is a regular. He'll be with us, you'll be going south."

"O.K. So I shut up. I don't want nothin' from no one. I don't even want to ride in one of their trucks. Let me out."

"Be sensible," Blake said. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks. Really. I just want to get home and wash my feet and see how I feel."

"They told me to buy you a steak dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"And you'll get 300 hours, mainly for your lost equipment."

"They can keep that too," Jim said.

"To make the report jibe, you have to take it."

"O.K., I'll take it to make the report jibe," Jim agreed. "Enough?"

"No, I'm taking you straight home," Blake said. "You think I work both sides of the street, don't you?"

"Say on."

"Well, we all do," Blake said. "Every one does, see? That's why I like to stay out in the boondocks all I can. But we all have to make compromises."

"Bullshit." Jim jerked awake. "I don't! You do maybe, I don't and you can't talk to me that way. If I wasn't so fucking tired I'd knock the shit out of you! Look," he said firmly and clearly, "I went through it. You showed me how first, then I did it and made it. That's all I owe you. If you want to be a grain of corn in a giant compromising turd, that's your business."

The truck was stopped at 400 Noel.

"You're a real character," Blake said. "Been a pleasure."

Jim didn't even bother to answer. Any answer would have made him a real character.

The truck drove on. Some day a check for over twelve hundred dollars for a four-day fury would come in the mail.

Some day he would not resent it.

12

RESURRECTION

He picked his way carefully into the yard and up the steps. He tried the door. It was locked. In anger he slammed against the barrier. He only hurt his bony shoulder. He looked sidewise through the little window pane and saw nail heads. Good old Joe. Without a lock he would simply nail the sonofabitch shut.

The back door was unlocked. He came in slowly. The place was colder and darker than it had been.

"Hey!" he croaked. "Joe? Kitty? Anyone home?"

No one answered. He limped into the bathroom and turned hot water into the tub. He eased his ruined feet, shoes and all, into the water. He felt better already. His belligerence cooled. He was a dirty, bearded, raggedly dressed beanpole sitting on the toilet soaking his shoes and feet in the adjacent tub.

Kitty poked her head in and squealed a minor scream. But no matter how he looked, he felt fine. His feet were so comfortable. O heaven, O paradise, O ambrosia. . . .

She came in and looked carefully. "Jesus God," she said. "What happened?"

"Been blazin' trail," he said. "Where's Joe?"

"Gone. He left. I don't know where."

"Why?"

"He just got mad one night, packed up and took off."

"Sure," said Jim vacantly.

"What do you mean, 'sure'?" she demanded.

"Well, obviously," Jim said, "he wouldn't stay."

He was bitter. If he had to take sides, he chose Joe's side. She didn't have to let that bastard chew on her tits as an insult to the man who loved her. There were a thousand other ways to get her kicks besides that.

He pried the slippery, soaked leather off his feet and eased his feet back into the water.

"You make enough for new shoes?"

"It was a high-priced fire," he murmured out of a sudden, sucking exhaustion as his strength at last failed, his reserve caved in, his no longer needed nerve slumped. Home being here, and safe.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"You mean us? Two by two? What about your dusky loveair, Merriweathair?"

"I don't like him any more. He's always got a problem," she said.

"So've I."

"No more." She licked her lips. "Your girl friend is in the poky. Good old Joe saw to that."

"Nomi?" He spoke out of a darkness. "What about Nomi?"

O, sadly now, thinking of her. Just an image; the tall, lovely, broken rose. O Nomi. O, her step was long, her body rich as sundown ploughland, her life a bursting thrill, her eyes most merry and ungentle, her eyes most holy, most life incarnate. O Nomi, what?

"He nailed up the door. He knew. The sonofabitch. I told him, I said, 'For Christ's sake, Joe, suppose somebody wants to come in that door?' 'Screw 'em,' he said to me, and he said, 'Nobody comes in my house without asking first.' And I said, 'Sure, but 'spose Jim's friend wants to come in?' 'That dumb, dirty, stupid klooch,' he said, 'I'm afraid to go to the can after she's been on it.' The louse."

"Honey," Jim said dreamily, "I've got to move or fall in the tub."

He pulled his swollen feet out of the water and laid them as gently as fevered pups on a towel on the floor.

It was like walking on nails and salt to get into his bedroom. He fell like a falling tree onto the bed. Out of it. Done in. They all thought he was guilty of something. They thought he was a simple clown. His eyes were shut; exhaustion like a dark flower pulled him down. He couldn't care less. Joe or Kitty or Nomi. Or Filson or Don or himself either. It never quite got to him about Nomi. He would see to it. He would see to it. He would take care of everyone right after he took care of Number One.

"Oh, you poor thing," he heard Kitty murmur through the ravels of sleep boating, floating deliciously.

He felt her taking off the raggedy shirt and black, abrasive undershirt. She handled him like a baby, he didn't care. Perhaps he was a baby. If the house had caught on fire he would have slept on through it and cared nothing about making his dream permanent.

Kitty was all woman. Off came his pants and shorts. He felt her put hand lotion or something soft and cool on his distant, burning feet. He felt a warm washcloth bathe him as he lay naked on his bed, drifting like an old log in a still pond of sleep, until he felt her lie beside him, her warmth coming so close to him. He cried little tears out of a profound oblivion. Oh mother, mother, mother.

Well, he couldn't help it. If she'd been anything, man, woman or child, animal, vegetable or mineral, it would have made no difference, none at all. For once in his life, as he drowned into the water weeds of exhausted peace, he was himself, alone, not responsible for anyone else.

He awakened in darkness, in a chill, in a moan of pain as if his joints were barbed and out of grease. She was kissing his throat. Who? Oh no, not Nomi. Her manner of love he knew, so smooth, so pure, but this throat gasped a harsh sex rattle, and he was without desire.

He opened his eyes and touched her hair. Kitty. Joe's girl. Joe was gone.

"Kit," he said, "Kit."

"Oh, I love you, honey," she said.

"You nut," he said. "You don't love me, you love Joe."

"Shut up, sweetheart," she said softly, her lips on his nipples.

"God knows," he said, pulling away, "you're the best-stacked broad from here to Seattle, but I'm not in season."

She was unsatisfied and bitchy. "Where's your manhood?"

"Saving it for my old age. I'm going to the john." It was an inalienable right, one of the last.

She watched him leave, his lean, dry bones screeching on tender feet.

In the bathroom he decided he'd been raped, but nicely. Well, he shrugged his scarecrow shoulders, you can't win 'em all.

He ran the tub full of warm water, climbed in and soaked, staring at the ceiling, letting the recollections of the fire float back from the laundry of sleep. Yes, his memories were much tidier, cleaner, fluffier, sweeter. When his mind came to the five ashen identities, it didn't lacerate itself in rebellion; when the image of the rabbit's hot guts on his shoe came back, it was neat enough to bring a smile of simple wonder. And at last, as the broth came back into his aching bones, and as the juice steamed up into his nerves, he began to think seriously of his situation.

Joe gone south alone. He would have to move. Kitty couldn't pay the rent by herself. She'd have to move too. Or else Merriweather could move in here with her; but then with winter coming, she would have to go south too. He too. Wife and whoosiz waited and winter was already close.

The sun was behaving like a real sun now, going up and down. He remembered the northern lights he'd seen out on the lake. In his mind suddenly, unbidden, came the death cry of the loon.

And what of the beautiful Nomi, the living death, somewhere he'd heard something bothersome.

"Hey, Kitty," he yelled.

She came into the bathroom shimmying into a slip, businesslike, her hair down, already a wife to him.

"How was I?" he asked ironically.

She took the hairpins out of her mouth. "You're the best goddamned lay I ever had," she said. "How are you when you're awake?"

"We'll never know."

"It figures. It's no goddamned wonder all the broads are chasing you."

"Tell me again about Nomi."

"Sure. Joe, you know him—he couldn't stand anything less than white, the crummy hypocrite, so he nailed the front door shut. He knew damned well she'd come around for you and now I know why, and I don't blame her, either, baby—but she couldn't get in. So she must've staggered on down the street at three in the morning drunker'n a hoot owl, singing that godawful song about the roses of love, and the fuzz bottled her."

"When was this?" he asked.

"Oh, I guess it was the second night you were gone. She kept screamin' at the door and old white boss, he called the cops. He made me promise I wouldn't tell, but screw him, the cheap, white-supremacy, Catholic sonofabitch, he did. He knew what she meant to you, and he still did it because he hates more than he loves."

Jim sunk lower in the tub.

"She's in the Federal jail," Kitty added, wiggling into a clean dress, her big breasts tied into their brassiere, hard as river-washed cobblestones.

"What are we going to do, Jim?" she asked, in a tone of giving her all to him.

"No," he said. "You know me well enough so I don't have to lie. You know we are not made for eternity."

"Sure," she replied, looking in the mirror and pinning up her hair. "But what's a few months or a year or so? What's the matter with us in a short run? I can work."

"Ho ho ho," he said. "And when you work, how you play."

"No kidding, Jim," she said, "I'd be true, I'd give you a good time, really."

"Lady doll," he said, "the stars aren't right. We can be anything but lovers. So what we're going to do is this. We're going our separate ways. As soon as I get packed, I'm moving."

"You don't have to be in such a big hurry, I'm not that bad."

"No, I am," he answered, starting to wash the smoke and ash and some of the misery off him. "You can keep the place, keep everything. You have money?"

"Enough," she said shortly, knowing he meant it. "If you're saying goodbye, say it, old bullhung, 'cause I'm late to work."

"Where you working now?"

"Still slinging hash."

"Where, though?"

"Place called Arblick's. Got a real nice boss. You know, PTA, Kiwanis, Boyscouter type. Kind of on the lonely side, too."

"Sweetheart, if you love me, stay away from sweet, kindly whiteslaver Arblick, will you? I know him."

"I'm late, Jim," she said. "You ought to see the parka he gave me. I was afraid to show it to Joe, but it's a wolf and mink and squirrel scalps, all that stuff, a real, genuine, native-made fur parka. God, it's just gorgeous. I think I'll stay up here just to wear it."

"That mother is a whoremaster, Kitty," he said.

"So?" She looked at him. "You got something better?"

"Kitty, doll, I can't marry all the women in the world I love, I can't. It's against the game laws, it's un-American, and besides, it'd never work. You just can't blame it all on me if you want to turn pro."

"Who's turning pro?" she said. "I'm a hasher, that's all. Maybe one of these old sourdoughs will come along with a million bucks, though. You never know, and brother, I'll be waiting."

"Come on back and run a switchboard or something. Please, Kitty," he said, getting out of the tub.

"God, man, with that," she said with a nervous laugh, "you coulda married the Queena England."

"Oh, pipe down." He wrapped a towel around his gaunt waist.

"How about elevenses?" she smiled, her eyes teasing.

"How about next Tuesdayses," he said. "Please, girl, you're not a goddamned whore on the line. Get yourself packed and I'll see you onto a plane south."

"Without that parky?" she said. "Oh, no."

"Where is it?"

"He's keeping it for me in cold storage," she said. "But it's mine as soon as it turns cold."

"Lady, you're breaking my heart. That guy is a cabbage head."

"More than Joe?"

"Of course," he said. "Joe's a man. He wants his woman to himself."

"He wants everything unto himself. Old Number One. Big joke. I'll see you, sweetie," she said, and kissed him on the cheek, turned and walked briskly out, her high heels tapping across the kitchen linoleum and out the back door, clacking merrily as a stick toy on down the sidewalk toward Arblick's Funhouse.

Goodbye, little Kitty. May a handsome, husky, bullhung sourdough with a claim of solid gold find you soon enough. May you find him soon enough. May you be able to find the itch to scratch. May you give Arblick a heart attack. Goodbye, Godspeed, farewell.

On, my God, he recalled again with remorse, a horrible feeling of naked inadequacy, there is not time enough to share.

In his dresser he found a note from Joe hidden under his last pair of socks.

> Dear Jim, Don't give her any money. She's got plenty and I'm sorry to bug out, but can't stay here with her. Hope you're O.K. and will see you in Fresno this winter. Keep your pecker up. Thanks. Joe.

"Thanks? Thanks for what?"

He cleaned the room up a bit, he picked up his smoky rags from the floor and a pair of black panties embroidered "Tuesday" and stuck them in the trash can.

He found a little plastic bag and stuck in a spare shirt. There was nothing left. Anything else he'd had were ashes in a lost world.

Now, that was done. Shipshape. One thing at a time. Goodbye to Joe. Goodbye to Kitty. Goodbye to Filson. Goodbye to Don and the two by two, and now get the shoes fixed if they were still fixable.

He carried his little bag with him; on his feet were soft slippers which eased his pitiful feet over the tilted sidewalks. How strange the weather had changed. The great, bald sky was lowering with thunderheads. No fires, boys, God has his piss can out today. Oh Christ, he hated the idea of the firefighting, the rotten, deceitful crap, the deadly, lethal, unplaying game. No more, by God. Filson, I wouldn't fly from here to Arblick's with you.

On Second Avenue as he started to cross through to the cobbler's, Ruthie, the squat little gaptoother, Nomi's friend, came up to him. She was sober, it being promenade time. Her jaw was set, her eyes worried.

"Hey, Jim, where you been?"

"Boondocks," he said. "Way out."

"Nomi's in jail."

"I heard."

"Well, are you goin' to bail her out?"

He hadn't thought of it that way.

"It costs a hundred and eighty dollars is all," she said seriously and intently. "Can you do it?"

"I can," Jim said. "I can try."

She looked at him warmly. "Say, Jim," she said in a different tone, "could you spare me a twenty? I got some bills."

Bills, bills, he knew the goddamned booze bills. "No, Ruthie," he said, "you get back out to your village. Get out there and get married and stay there."

"I am married," she said. "I'm married to a guy in the village already. I need twenty dollars for a plane ticket."

"I'll buy the ticket and see you off," he said firmly.

"How would you like a real good time?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders in defeat. "You and me, we go over to Momma Arblick's, I'll give you anything you like, no kiddin'."

He was sick with a carbolic rage. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "Can you piss red, white and blue and whistle God Bless America up my asshole?"

"Oh, shut up," she said. "You ain't that kind. O.K." Then looking back coldly and bitterly, she said again, "O.K., O.K., cheapskate. Fuck you."

"Sure," he said. "I bleed."

And he did. No matter how firm his resolves, he couldn't help it. This steady, sincere, loving race reduced to dogshit, this merry-eyed, untroubled, and unselfish people so perverted. Sure. Fuck you. Fuck Jim, and fuck the President, and the Vice President, the Cabinet including the Secretary of Agriculture, screw the Secretary of Interior, and the Secretary of Defense. Give him a good joust, and fuck the senate and the majority and minority whips, and the Congress and the lobbyists and the bureaucrats, and fuck 'em all!

Sick, sick, sick, he told himself. Get a grip. You've had a kind of lowgrade week, maybe you better just take it easy. Have a drink, have something to eat.

He had forgotten he hadn't eaten for how long, how long, and cared less.

The shop was dark, but the door was open. He carried the shoes into the cobbler's slowly, doubtfully.

How frail he looked, how pale, how ancient, how like the High Lama of Tibet. The terribly big, round blue eyes stared up at him without memory.

"Hello," Jim said. "Remember me?"

"What was it?"

"These shoes," Jim said. "Can you fix them again?"

He put the shoes on the counter. The old man's arm gently, as if a sudden motion would shatter the old bones, floated his shaking left hand out to touch the shoe.

"It has been burned," his voice crackled. "God bless you, son, it is dead. It is already too late."

"Nomi?" Jim asked intently, trying to keep the gently floating mind and eyes in one place for an instant.

"Nomi? Nomi Mountain? Yes, she's all right." The old man's head shook with palsy and his eyes looked out the dusty window. "Nomi is all right now." He simpered. "She's in jail, y'know. 'S fine."

"But she's got to be freed," Jim said. "It costs a hundred and eighty dollars."

"Well, she's fine, don't you see? Yes, yes, yes, she's fine now. Music and literature and everything."

And looking at the dead old eyes in the wrinkled white paperskin, Jim knew he was too late. Too late. Damn that fire.

"What shall I do for shoes?" Jim asked.

The feather hand oozed out again, hefted the warped and split and soleless things.

"No," the old man finally said. "You get mukluks. Winter is almost here."

Jim turned away and the old man said, "Wait, don't leave them. They smell like smoke."

Jim turned back angrily. "All right, all right—" He took the shoes and stuffed them into his plastic zippered bag.

Ah, he had a brown, ashy taste in his mouth. He didn't like ancient, senile men. They should die sooner. Out on the ice adrift.

Jim carried his little bag over to the Pedro. Tex was behind the bar, his great, silver belt buckle sparkling.

"Hi, Smoky," Tex yelled with enthusiastic cheer. "How's the boondocks?"

"Far and few between," Jim said. "What about Nomi?"

"Nomi, I don't know," Tex said. "Man, she was so drunk she couldn't have hit the ground with her shoe. Couple days ago. Man, what a fuckin' party she had. Timbered this joint three times, and everyplace on the street. Next thing we heard, she was jugged."

"Aren't you going to get her out?"

"Well, sure, I'd help go her bail, but she's already passed the judge. She's hit ninety days, boy, she ain't goin' on bail."

"Ninety days for drunk?" Jim asked incredulously.

"Sure. They'll rest her up and feed her. Man, stick around, those ninety-day virgins are real choice ass."

"Ninety days," Jim said, figuring it out. "That puts it about November." He looked up at the calendar. There was a large cross on Thanksgiving Day. Tex already had it marked.

"I'm goin' to raffle off a klooch turkey if you're not here." Tex laughed. "You and me is the only ones knows the dates. I can make a hell of a bundle just out of the fun of it."

"You know, I haven't eaten for three days," Jim said. "This beer kind of hits me."

He got up from the stool, carrying the ditty bag, and went out into the street.

He was a man with all the money in the world: money he had just picked up in the wilderness hour by hour, as abstractions on timecards which ultimately were transformed into green government checks. Hardly stirring a hand, certainly without producing anything, he had accumulated through the summer close to four thousand dollars, which would be enough to carry him and his family through the winter, buy rent, groceries, liquor, gasoline, telephone.

Should he reserve a hundred and eighty dollars for Nomi? Tex was an ignorant thief like Ernie, but he knew the practical sections of the law. Tex said, "Send 'em some cigarettes." How many were there? How many brown girls in gray steel cells?

Cigarettes? Oh, that sonofabitch. So she was in the process of becoming a ninety-day virgin again.

Jim leaned up against the front of the Pedro along with half a dozen short, brown statues and laughed. If he knew Nomi at all, they would never get a virgin from her, not if a jailer had eyes, or a girl were in the top bunk, or if anything. Jim had seen her go through a smoky orgasm as they lay in bed with their bodies not touching, only her eyes ravishing his eyes. He had seen the hot, scalding sex go steaming down through her eyes into the curious alight cells of her loin, had seen the sure and wet booming surf go right through into her eyes and flood back again with a wide blossom, like a tidepool anemone, opening, bursting for the moment.

Ah, no, Tex, you keep the calendar. My Nomi will take care of her virginity.

The door had been nailed tight.

He stood leaning against the wall until he could see his slippers clearly. What to do? Bear was in jail, broke, the winter coming.

A little, emaciated native sidled up to him. "If I had just twelve more cents, I could get a bottle of wine."

"What's your name?" Jim asked.

The little wino was hard put for a moment to think of his name. "Robert," the little native said. "Robert Peary."

"Oh," Jim said. "Northpole Peary—"

"Yes." The Eskimo was delighted. "My father went with him."

"How did he like the North Pole?"

"Oh, same as any place else," the little man shrugged. "Not much to hunt."

Jim put a half dollar in his giant's magic hand, a hand that could carve death for the enormous bear from a spring of walrus ivory, the hand that could made a sled from driftwood and urine. Oh, no, not that hand, no, his father's hand.

But Robert Peary didn't bother about all the mad ruminations of the scarecrowed kid in slippers. He was already bowlegging it down the street for his bottle of port wine.

Et puis, et puis encore. And screw you, Baudelaire.

He had to get it straight about Nomi. Before eating, before anything. He had to know at least the cold truth from someone.

He had only to cross the street catercornered to the post office where on the second floor were the barred windows. To get to the jail section, he went around to the back door.

Even as he was thinking over what he was to ask, a patrol car pulled up and a policeman, just an ordinary-sized, blue-uniformed high school graduate, stepped out and around to the back door of his car, reached in and grabbed a handful of shirt, hoisting out his prisoner.

Ruthie. Drunker'n a boiled bar dog. Out, smiling, blank-eyed, not standing, held only slightly erect by the officer's grip on the back of her shirt. The pressure squeezed her fat breasts out against her flimsy shirt. She looked at Jim as the officer hefted her casually, unsmiling, but not with viciousness or sadism, only a bored clerk adding to the inventory. She looked at Jim through Jim, never even seeing him. A total drunk.

Jim followed them in. A man in uniform at the desk looked up.

"First and Cushman," the officer holding her up said, and hurried her on into an elevator.

The man at the desk spoke as he laboriously wrote, "Ruth Schwatka. No address. Drunk. First and Cushman." He knew her from prior arrests, it was just another brick in the wall of his day, in the structure of his life.

Had no one thought to prevent it happening? Or was such charity and brotherly love too crass and maudlin for the rugged far north?"

He was beginning to think like a social worker, a step-five, sub-G, two-week-vacation type, working to be step-six, sub-F, two-week-vacation type.

The officer at the desk laid down his ballpoint pen and stared at the door for a few seconds and, having gotten organized, he turned to Jim.

"Somethin'?"

"I'd like some information," Jim said, "about a prisoner."

"Name?"

Jim was almost embarrassed. He was behaving like a traitor to his race and class before this man of obvious authority.

"Nomi. Nomi Mountain."

The old officer glared at him, his red, rheumy eyes narrowing.

"What about her?"

"Well, is she here, and if she is, how much to bail her out?"

Somewhere a crazy band was playing. Off in a distant corner or in the street. It jangled Jim's thought.

The officer slowly turned his gaze back to his book and flipped a couple pages.

"Nomi Mountain. Arrested two nights ago, drunk, resisted arrest. Corner Noel and Fourth. Went before the lady judge at ten the next morning and was sentenced to ninety days. That's it. No bail."

"Somebody said a hundred and eighty dollars."

"You might have got her out that morning for a hundred eighty, but not now."

"Can I see her?" Jim asked desperately.

"Read the sign." the officer poked his head at a sign on the wall.

VISITING HOURS
10 A.M. TO 12 NOON
SECOND FLOOR ONLY

"Tomorrow morning," the officer said and chewed his cheeks. "She'll be clean then. You can bring her cigarettes."

"She's O.K.?"

"Sure. Better'n she was."

"What's the noise up there?" Jim asked.

"The Salvation Army band. They come in at night to entertain the prisoners."

"Oh, boy," Jim said. "Entertained."

"Better'n nothin'."

"Yeah, O.K. See you tomorrow morning."

The officer was bored with the do-gooder kloochman. He despised kloochmen. He'd seen hundreds of the huskies brought in vomiting, pissing, dripping with come, utterly filthy, stinking, unclean animals. Worse than dogs.

Jim went out feeling unclean, an unclean white man.

Next. Next. The sharp air kept saying to him, kept prodding him. Next, what next, next?

Next I get a plane ticket. Next I start to eat. Next I start to drink. Next I start to sleep. Next I see Nomi. Next I'm going home. Home, O home, no more completely lovely word.

O.K. Whoosiz, I'm O.K. I'm just nuts, I'm just bleeding like Valley Forge. But I'll be gotohell, I've got the loot.

Crossing Cushman on the green, he ambled slowly up the street to the airline office, stepped inside and for about two hundred dollars he was booked out on a flight that left at noon the next day. He passed over the money to the clerk. He accepted a ticket. He carefully put the ticket in his wallet. He had fifty dollars left, and he was clear.

He remembered stories of the guys who had started to leave but were trapped by one last drink, one last hand of hearts, one last piece of klooch pussy, just one more and bingo, they were in harness the next year and the year after, until they never went back outside, never saw gorgeous Whoosiz, never returned to their life and were never at home here.

No, Dad, he said going into a souvenir shop, not this cat.

Japanese ivory, machine-woven baskets, Du Pont furs. He settled upon a small Alaska state flag. The big dipper and Polaris in gold on a sky of deep blue. Something to remember me by.

He had time, a lifetime in a few hours now. Now he could eat something. It was all over but the shouting. Just get to the airport at noon, and turn himself over to clerks, hostesses, airplanes.

The cobbler's shop was closed. It seemed to have been closed for ages. The powdery dust of the street had caked up on the sills of the door and window. It was chilly. Up the street was a place advertising itself as a steakhouse.

He had no appetite. He preferred to keep floating, but he was going back, and where he was going people didn't float. They ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They had two coffee breaks, where they tried two titillations per day, five days a week. On Saturday nights they tried to lay their neighbor's wife. On Sunday they got over hangovers and tried to be paternal and modern.

Eat, the new time said. Everyone in the worrisome future was saying: Eat.

He hadn't eaten anything for he didn't know how long, not since the long, lingering C-ration breakfast that unbusy morning when the little five acres of moss was smoldering coolly alongside, and Beane was saying sleepily, "Well, boys, we'll just have something to eat then we'll give it a lick and a spit." And the other five yawned and agreed, ha ha, ho ho, yep yup yop, sho sho. And Jim had nodded nervously, not even caring to know their names, such an old firefighting vet he'd been. The college kids, the old, hooked-in kloochman types. Goodbye.

"A steak," he said. "The biggest and best. Medium rare."

"Roquefort," he replied. "Baked," he said, but the wine, ah, there was a chance for a man to be unique. He could choose one of ten.

"A nice red wine?" she asked.

"No," he said, glaring at the card, "the Chenin Blanc."

"Oh," she said coldly and left.

He tasted the wine. It was fine. It was the best California had, and California was home through no fault of his.

But then the night was growing darker outside and chillier.

She brought the salad with the Roquefort dressing. She brought the plate with the New York cut, the baked potato in foil split exactly as they were split in California.

He ate tiredly. The steak was the equivalent of a steak, the same as a sausage is a sausage. Exactly as the wrong wine was exact. Exactly as all was exact but himself and his waitress, whom he loved. My God, she smelled cozy and cool, better than the wine. Better than anything he'd smelt since Kitty this morning.

Certainly Nomi was dead. Whatever body they had caged in the Federal jail was only a remnant of what she really was. The ninety days would be a short reprieve when what health she had would be softened with idleness and accustomed to steam heat and wool blankets. Then on Thanksgiving Day they would let her loose to howl. The ninety-day virgin would be passing out drunk in a matter of hours, and then be fouled and frozen in sub-zero darkness. And she would not give a snap of her finger, one way or the other.

He considered as he sliced into the rare beef, that she was dead. To him, to his poetic fancy, to the Eskimo world, to Baudelaire, to herself, she was dead. That the state would feed her and keep her warm in a pen for eighty-eight more days was simply another stupidity. She was dead. Where would they bury her?

The real mark of civilization was the establishment of a mortuary. It was the big time. Jim had not noticed a funeral parlor anywhere in town, but there surely must be one somewhere. There was a graveyard outside of town on a little hill. It was bulldozed and burned out of a forest of willows and alders and birch. Would they hack out the permafrost and put a box with a frozen, TB-raddled, bruised, battered, scarred, laughing klooch down into the icy mud?

The wine was good. It cleared his head and it helped to cover the taste of the freezer burn on the steak. He chewed and swallowed and drank, deep in his own thoughts and unconcerned with the dinner. It was a good idea for him to eat something once in a while.

When his wife was nearby, he ate to humor her along. But such an intake was unnecessary and a waste of time.

Does an Eskimo have a soul? Does a dirty, filthy, immoral, drunken Eskimo whore klooch have a chance at the golden ring? He guessed God would provide a space in heaven, assuming she could ever get out of the hard, frozen muck. Of course, he reasoned, when the world burns, the muck will thaw, and she can have her chance. But O, that permafrost—that's a biting, devouring cold. What a hell of a place to be buried.

She was dead. She would never arise. She was beauty killed by early frost. Her eyes would not glow like Baja pearls, her lips would be black as frozen squash blossoms, her liquid body would always be a rigid block of ice in a casket, in a bog of mud ice, perfectly preserved forever. Ah, that was a real hell. Oozing away into a wet moss would be something at least, eaten by the great white bear would be just, burned into fire and air would be a bliss of energy, but to be locked in ice forever was the ultimate torment for her grace of movement.

There are no great men save poet, priest, and soldier.

She was dead. Utterly dead. It was hopeless and he meant it, though not with tears. He only faced the fact that when he gave her up, she was dead. Because no one else was even close to seeing her as she really was. No one could phrase her grace, her wild beauty, her dignity, her soul, her love of life, and her implacable courage in the face of total disaster.

"Coffee?" his waitress asked, ardor now burning in her cheeks.

"Check," he said. "Please."

She was disappointed. But who wasn't?

The check arrived in a little dish.

"Was the steak all right?" she asked.

"Excellent," he said, putting a ten-dollar bill on top of the unread chit and starting to rise.

"What's your hurry?" she asked a shade coyly, but with a little honest curiosity too.

"I've got a lot to do. I have to fly. I have to catch a plane."

This let him off the hook. Now she could get through the night thinking, He loved me but he had to catch a plane—and of course, it was true. He did love her and he did have to catch a plane. And he had a lot of things to do between times.

It was pitch black. There were no stars or moon shining through the cold overcast. A few lights along the street gave illumination, but it was tawdry yellow light, with little red spots of neon scattered about, and it was not comfortable leaning against the front of the Pedro, or sitting on the bus bench in front of the post office. It was definitely cold already. Overhead he thought he heard the Salvation Army band playing, or was it a flock of geese going south from the lagoons and sweet ponds and sloughs in the farther north?

His feet felt better. Time was already heeling the broken blisters and raw burns. But he had a night to spend in this town which he had despised, probably, he thought simply, because of his own digestion or chemistry or something.

So he despised it, no matter the sturdy worth of numerous sturdy citizens who might even have seen it as he saw it, but whom he had never spoken to, and to whom he was totally unknown and his pain nothing. No one of the comfortable knew his agony, or knew he had it in his power to despise them. Merchant, tailor, union agent, cobbler, priest, they didn't know him and he didn't know them.

But he knew she was dead. That was for sure. In his mind, not only she and he were together buried in an icy hell eternally, but the entire western world was right alongside them, and he didn't like it. He didn't want his wife and child to bear such a burden which they had to bear without even awareness; he didn't want to despise the merchant, tailor, union agent of Fairbanks, or anything else. All he wanted was to see the living live, and those having lived, die.

Only a couple of the more hardy natives were still leaning in the chill against the Pedro. Across the street he could see the lights of the jail on the second floor. She was lying up there in a wire bunk, coughing considerately, smoking cigarettes provided by Tex and Arblick's boys, and making eyes at the ceiling.

He nodded to two Eskimos who looked ahead and didn't notice his nod or refused to admit it, or wouldn't nod back. So the hell with 'em. He had forty dollars. He had a plane ticket and he had twelve hours to choke it all down.

In the Pedro the urinals of cement, all damp with shortpeckered Eskimo piss, smelled strongly in the crowded room. The bar was nearly full of customers, all were nursing their beer, and a few klooches were trying to down their vodka shots.

Buck Orneri was at his best. Jim counted sixteen pearl snap buttons on the striped silk shirt.

A couple of black whores moved in the door. One was familiar and puzzling until he recalled she was the bait that snared Billy Bear, and now with winter come, what will the poor whore do, poor thing? In complete elegance, all dressed in tight gold stretch pants and tight silver blouses, they were living nudes in a golden land. Their breasts and pointed butts working like golden retrievers in fields of yellow leaves, they strolled through the horseshoe bar, grinning and nodding at each other, hoping there was a live one in the place somewhere.

"Get outta here," Tex snarled when he realized they weren't going to buy a drink on their own and would steal one of his customers if they could.

Oh yes, the winter was pulling its drawstring down tight as the customers became customers instead of pigeons to be plucked.

She is dead, he thought, as he drank the beer before him.

He gazed around the horseshoe bar. There must be sixty stools filled with natives and kloochmen, the dogfaces looking for a Circe, and old Buck Orneri was bellowing his song and swatting at his mother-of-pearl guitar. O dead dead dead and cold. He mourned.

Glancing to his left, as he felt a slight nudge of his elbow, he noticed a girl turning away from him. She wore a long pink taffeta dress with golden girdle and intricate bindings.

No one seemed to notice her in the heavy smoke. No one seemed to see her through the din and Orneri's godawful hanging notes. Yet Jim was terrified. It was Nomi's back.

How could she be dead, or if not quite dead, still dying in the steel jailhouse, and yet be there walking tall and warm away from him toward Buck Orneri, moving gently in a long pink dress through the stubby little beerbottled natives jitterbugging to the ridiculous song: They wilted and withered in only a day. . . .

No, it was another klooch on the make, only a female making a track.

She approached the little platform where Orneri was standing and smacking at his guitar. He didn't notice her. But she continued up the two steps and gently pushed him aside as he finished the song. No one noticed. No one except Jim, who had gone mad.

She picked up the gaudy, crazy electric guitar and strummed off a single sweet and pleasant chord, then her head held high, her face perfectly composed, her scars simply never there, and with a voice calm, sweet and full of joy, Nomi sang a curious song, beginning, "*Nahtah . . . Nahtah. . . .*"

All right. Jim was willing to admit a hallucination. Obviously no one else saw her. He poked a construction bum at his right and nodded at her.

"Some doll, huh?" he asked casually.

The bum looked at Jim.

"Leave off me," he said. "Just leave me alone, kid."

He turned his back. He had not seen her.

Jim admitted to himself he was crazy. In a way it was pleasant, because the right things happened when you were crazy.

She never noticed him. He didn't expect her to. She was singing the ritual song of the snow owl to a larger audience.

He ordered two drinks, but she never came to drink hers and so he drank it himself. Tex was giving him a glancing, fishy eye even as he stole his money. They'll get me yet, Jim thought, and decided to move on because as he looked back, Orneri was singing his song about the Flowers of Love, and

Jim was thinking about the Flowers of Evil. She was dead. It was undeniable. Cruelty killed her and lechery ate a lung, and revolution took her home. Definitely she was dead. He had buried her in icemud.

O God, his mind!

"If I had twelve cents," Robert Peary said, "I could get a bottle of port wine."

"What are you doing with all these bottles of port wine?" Jim asked.

"Drinkin'."

"Well, sit here, Robert," Jim said. "I'm not feeling well just now. Just sit here and drink my drink. I'll be back in just a minute."

"Yessir," Robert Peary replied gladly, tossing off the vodka and sipping Jim's new beer.

Jim rolled away, anxiously thinking it was fresh air he needed. The smell of the urinals and smoke and Negro whores and ripe natives and Alaska and original sin in general and himself most of all was wanting to make him puke.

He reeled out the door onto the sidewalk where it was dark and cheerless. A few over-age construction bums strolled down the street, patrolling for a quick, free piece of ass no matter if it were ninety-nine years old and unconscious behind a garbage barrel.

He snorted and nearly belched a quart of beer on the street. He backed carefully against the front of the Pedro. It was safe. Anyway, if you leaned here, they wouldn't throw you in the hoosegow. So he leaned in the cold, dark night, watching the bleary yellow hall lights of the Federal jail wind around in his head. People were going by. They never stopped, rain or shine, thirty below or eighty above, they always, always moved along. Construction bums, natives, police, merchant, poet, warrior, priest, and even as he watched lopsidedly, she approached.

She is dead. Stone cold daid in the graveyard. *Morte.*

He was about to fall slumping in crazy tears of grief when she came toward him. No. O no, O yes.

Hallelujah!

With a blast of flame that split my soul, I saw her rise again.

He stood, afraid and denying it all. He was mortal, he was a thing of nerves and fears. He had superstitions and religions in him. He had great grief and love in him. He shrank against the wall. Resurrection was her privilege. She had earned it. But he was not near worthy to witness the miracle. He was only a man, a married man with a child and four thousand dollars, too weak and unprepared to witness death become life, the penultimate act of God.

He leaned against the wall as she floated in a pink dress up the wall of the Federal jail and disappeared into a barred window.

Drunk? Mad? Whatever are we but the sight of the wildest?

13

CONTACT

PASSING BY the dark doorway of the cobbler's shop, he saw a small card tacked to the door. He would have liked to talk to his strange benefactor before leaving. He would have liked to ask who he really was. Was he just a '98er kloochman? A missionary, saloonkeeper, soldier? Or was he a demigod? Or was he just another hallucination of Mad Jim's mind?

The card read: "To Jim Carondelet. Buy new shoes in Fresno. Goodbye. Mr. K——"

Jim wrote a brief reply: "I saw her rise from the dead. What should I do? Your friend, Jim."

God knows he was full of beer and tired to death and dazed by miracles, but he had to search through the night for the complete essence of the summer.

THE CRAZY HOUSE was painted in bleeding letters on the door. He pushed on in. It was the scummiest place in town. Dark and small, its stinks were more concentrated, the air more loaded.

He sat on a stool by the door. A couple of bowlegged Eskimos were slowly jitterbugging on the little dance floor. A few white-haired Eskimos or Indians sat sternly at the bar. The bartender was a fat, worried, unhearty man.

Jim ordered a beer. In the gloom, out of the night, materialized Robert Peary. He recognized Jim through hungover grape-blue eyes and sat alongside him. The bartender ignored him.

"No more," Jim said before Robert spoke.

"I don't want nothin'," Robert replied, hanging his head in shame because he really did want something.

"Pretty nice, huh?" Robert asked, indicating the room, the dancers, the fireballing jukebox.

"Yeah, nice!" Jim nodded.

He was thinking he couldn't make it through the night. The walk down the street by the lighted jail had taken a lot out of his legs. He hadn't had a free and easy unencumbered sleep for too long.

"You wanta girl?" Robert Peary asked.

"No," Jim answered truthfully. "No, I guess not."

"I could get you a nice girl if you'd buy a bottle of port wine for us."

"Where would we drink it?"

"We would drink it at her house and you could sleep with her, too." Robert Peary tried to grin as evilly as he could, but it was ludicrous.

"I'd like to sleep," Jim said. "Just sleep, period."

"This girl, she likes a fellow, she does."

"Where is she?"

Jim thought of the bed. That's what he needed, a plain bed. In the morning the world would not be dismal or high hallucinatory. In the morning all would be well. He would pay a call at the jail and would go to the airport and fly away home.

"O.K. Where is the girl?"

"She is at her house waiting for me."

"Is she a clean girl?"

What a question, he thought, what kind of an answer would he get?

"She's very clean. She's my youngest niece," Robert Peary said.

Another gaunt little native edged in with Robert Peary.

"What does he say?" the taller one asked anxiously.

"He says O.K. Say, this is my cousin, Fred Chukochin."

"My name is Jim Carondelet," Jim said shaking hands with Fred.

"We goin' to get some wine and go to the place?" Fred asked.

"Let's go," Jim said. "I need a little sleep."

Outside the street was cold and darker. Only a little light came from the hole-in-the-wall liquor store at the corner. Jim went slowly. Weariness was bearing down on him like an ice wall. He bought two bottles of Fresno's cheapest from a Chinese woman who looked to be over a hundred years old, and letting Robert Peary carry the bag of bottles, he went along without speaking.

They were grinning eagerly, and in a way furtively, at each other because they couldn't believe their good fortune, and they could hardly wait to get to the cabin for a drink and a warm, floating-away kind of a party.

It was a couple of blocks from the last street light. The night was deep. The men passed down the street like quiet, stealthy animals, moving in fantasy. It seemed they were three thugs going through the night to do a high crime. Their voices were nearly whispers.

He followed them through a maze of junked cars and up through a back door of a small log cabin which was divided into a bedroom and kitchen. Both reeked of fuel oil and soap.

There was a figure in the bed, a tall girl with dark hair. The overhead light was on. She was not asleep, she was reading a comic book and listening to a small record player.

For a moment he was ready to believe it was Nomi, but as he came closer, he saw that she was actually younger than Nomi, an Eskimo girl of about seventeen.

She looked up at him with more curiosity than surprise. She was barefooted, wore a full dress or possibly a parky cover of printed cotton, and as she slipped off the bed and took the short step to the record player, Jim saw that she was about eight months pregnant. Her belly was low and pushed out the dress like a huge watermelon.

"Mary, this is Jim," Robert said. "He bought us the port wine. He's staying with us."

Oh you sly little Eskimo, sure she's young, but were I buying her, you would have conned me because, somehow, you forgot that condition of hers. A small problem.

Jim smiled. It was exactly right.

The tranquillity of the little cabin in the night was shattered by the blast of the record player as Mary put the needle onto her favorite song.

Jim jumped and moved to lower the volume a little. She looked at him.

"Pretty nice, huh?" she asked, meaning the music.

Robert Peary brought two glasses of wine from the kitchen for Mary and Jim. Fred eased in, a warm, wet smile on his face. He had already sneaked a drink. Jim took his glass and asked someone to make a toast.

"You," Mary said. "You do it, Jim."

"I don't know. What would you like most of all?" he replied, distressed and worried. How could you be savvy with a people when you didn't even know their heart's desire?

"Oh, we got everything, Jim," Mary said. "It isn't that."

"Oh, O.K., then," Jim said. "Then here's to kindness."

It was all they wanted.

"We'll be in the kitchen," Robert Peary said, heading back for another drink. "You guys can go to sleep."

Fred followed, aglow and needing more.

The song was low now as Jim surreptitiously turned down the volume. Mary sipped the sweet wine.

She sat on the side of the bed. "I'm big," she said, "too big. I'm tired of it."

"How long?" Jim asked.

"Another month, I guess."

"Father?"

She shrugged; she didn't bother to speak.

"Where will you have it?" Jim asked.

"Oh, I'll go over to St. Joseph's," she said. "It's all taken care of."

"The Native Service?"

"Ahhh," she said disgustedly, "not me. I don't have to listen to all that stuff. There's plenty people willing to pay a girl's expenses."

"In exchange for the baby?" Jim asked with a forced complacency.

"Sure. The baby should get a good home, don't you think?"

"Yes," Jim agreed, "but what will you do?"

"What do you mean 'what will I do?' I'm O.K."

"But I mean will you go back to your village?"

"I can't. The Bureau made us come here, but I don't like dormitories, and then that soldier, he lied to me. I don't know. They all say I love you, you know, but they just want to longcock somebody."

"That's the way soldiers are," Jim said.

A mile away he could hear the soft murmurings and chucklings and clink of glass in the kitchen.

"I suppose that's what you want too?"

"No, child," Jim said, "I came just to sleep."

"Well," she sighed, "I could maybe make love but I don't much want to, and I'm not sleepy."

"Well, damn it, I am."

He started to take off his slippers and she said, "Where's your shoes?"

"Where's yours?"

"O.K.," she said. "One more drink and a song and we go to sleep, O.K.?"

"Fine," Jim said. "Go ahead."

She went into the kitchen with her empty glass and spoke sharply to the men who were sitting on the floor, relaxed and easy. The first bottle was empty.

"C'mon, you guys," she said, "where's my drink?"

The men chuckled jollily, slowly, dreamily, they were always willing to share. Robert Peary pointed to the paper bag without speaking, almost as if to say, "I am great hunter. I have brought in two bottles of wine. Drink and shut up."

But he was only dreaming.

She opened the bottle and said, "Now save me some for tomorrow, O.K.?"

They nodded joyfully, without greed, actually exuberant with their generosity and love.

She loved them too.

She walked heavily, awkwardly, back to the bed. Jim had disappeared in the blankets. His clothes were on the chair.

He watched her heaviness carried in contrast to her lightness in motion. This is the way the world turns.

Four score and eight months ago the soldier boy vowed, "I love you. Of course, honey, we'll get married just as soon as Uncle Sam lets me," and burst his being into her, and this ground is not consecrated, hallowed, only laughed at in amusement, a child will pop out between her legs one morning, will be given to the baby trade, will be a tear in a drunken eye years hence, assuming she lives that long, is all that tough, can be merry and persevering so long.

And the ex-soldier boy, back down in Houston just now, is working in a service station, is bullshitting with the boys around the grease rack, saying, "Goddamn, I got a good piece of that klooch stuff up there, I tell you. I got a mind to go back. Soon as I get together a little stake I'm agoin'. Boy, they just don't make the lovin' down here like they do up there, and anybody can get it anytime he wants it, for nothin'. Sho now, I ain't lyin'. Course, they ain't exactly white, understand, 'course not, but they're a little better'n a nigger. Well, I just don't know why, but they are. And the wages up there would make this job look like a boar with tits. I ain't shittin' you, believe me."

She sipped her wine, yawned, moved the arm of the phonograph across to point zero again and let it remain on low volume.

The song played for him. It had to have a meaning larger than itself, it had corkscrewed through his ear into his mind all the long summer, what did it mean?

"But then you forgot the roses so red, Flowers of Love I remember you said. They wilted and withered in only a day, and you broke my heart when you went away."

She finished the glass. "Now you ain't gettin' no nothin', I guess," she said to him.

"Sleep. Beautiful dreams. Come on to bed, fat lady."

"O.K. But I don't believe you."

"You're going to be disappointed then," he said.

She stood, pulled the mother hubbard gown over her head and tossed it in the corner. From the kitchen were mumbles, murmurs and clinkings.

"Now you guys keep quiet in there!" she yelled. "Or get the hell out."

There was a silence of creeping mice, and a faint giggle like a wavering whisper. Jim smiled and she smiled back. She was fine even in her worst time. If one could ignore the tight-stretched belly, the belly button spread out, the pubic hair curved and stretched into wide swaths, the heavy load itself like a great egg, ignoring that, she was a young Nomi. Her breasts were heavy, firm, virginal. Deep rosy rings circled like a target the stubby, bull's-eye nipples. Her arms were firm and strong, even her legs as they worked under the burden of child, were unscarred, slim and long—dancer's legs, young doe deer's legs.

But they were not for him. The room was dark. The phonograph stilled, and as she bumbled in beside his own naked bones, he heard the town's dog population screaming in concert. She crept in close to him, her hair was sweet, her face on his shoulder, her body forming, fitting into his.

"Oh, you're a beauty," he said.

"Be still and go to sleep."

She took his hand in the folds of blankets and brought it over to lay upon her tight, bulged abdomen.

"Feel it," she whispered.

He felt the skin jerk from the thumping, forming foot or knee deep inside her. He felt the miracle of life within life. He felt another extension of himself.

By God, he'd had enough that day. He'd had a lifetime indeed in this day, and he'd had an eternity of angels when he'd seen Nomi accomplish resurrection before his eyes, and he surely needed no more to become a wise man. Her great downy tight-stretched belly jerked and pitched recklessly within.

He shut his eyes and laughed. Now everything was all right. Alaska was paradise, the klooches would all live to be benevolent grandmothers, the gusty crown fires would be just exciting spectacles, the rotgut vodka would be fully appreciated, the saints and unborn babes were surging forward, the hot, fast money, the Federal jail, the Arblick cad were part of the whole miracle. Billy Bear's family would catch many fish and many furs, their dogs would multiply. Moose and salmon would fill their cache. Hail Mary, full of grace. There would never be another bearland summer.

—O let me, let me be born in the essence of love, let me weave a hide of horn to withstand the deathmen. Let me weave a net of music to fling over my sea of unsung shoals of souls to affirm and live, affirm and live, affirm and live—

Whatever he was he became a dream. The woman lay enclaved with him, sleeping the sleep of womanhood. She had never had a sleep problem. Never had a life problem. She believed because she was unable to comprehend deceit. She was unable to even weave deceit into her own child's basket, as if it too were a solid substance from the ice and the forest, from the seal and the auklet, the salmon and the black fox.

From the kitchen there were faint chuckling murmurs and the glug of the second bottle going its way.

From the city came the great concerted howls of malemutes on chains.

From the nearby forest there was a shriek of rabbit and the sudden hiss of knifing owl wings.

For the first time in a week a blessedly calm and restful sleep had come upon him. He was warm, comfortable. He belonged to a woman beside him. He was safe from harm.

Awakening in the strange and familiar bed, warm with the heat of her body crossing into his, refreshed as if the anchor of fatigue had been cut, he felt he would have to try to be, no matter where.

He yawned and glanced at the girl beside him. Her hair was black and swung loosely over the pillow. One of her large, rigid breasts lay on the coverlet. He felt her slim legs over his, locking him in. She was nature. The wild bird look on her face, the golden light radiating.

He kissed her lips as if they were ripe Bing cherries, and he whispered, "I love you, Mary."

As the tears formed in his eyes, he stuffed his bones into his shapeless clothes, his healing feet into his slippers and walked into the kitchen. He couldn't stand the nearness of such a horn of plenty for himself.

In different corners, curled up like cats, were Robert Peary and Fred Chukochin. The bottles were empty.

"God love you," he said.

He'd had a good sleep, he'd approached a love like an abyss and he had not slipped on the precipice and fallen. He would catch that plane. He would make a life of what he had. By God, he was set and stubborn and determined.

He washed his face in the kitchen sink, and going back into the other room where the girl lay awake, he said, "Mary, I've got to go. If I stay, I'll never leave."

"That doesn't make any sense," she said.

"Well, it's the way of my life, I've got love in me like a fishhook."

"Oh, pipe down," she said sleepily. "If you can't be good, be careful."

She grinned at the tired old joke, and let herself ride on her own warm surf. The wonderful warm brown of her skin glowed with light like a Tahitian by Gauguin.

He shook his head. She was a member of a soon extinct and absorbed race, and she would burn through her maturity like gasoline ablaze. He turned away.

He walked carefully on tender feet through the broken glass, discarded bones, and bent steel rods until he reached the street. A few blocks to the north he could see the skyscraper, leaning like the tower of Pisa, marking his direction. He turned left and headed up the street toward town. He touched his pocket. The ticket was there. He had survived the night or perhaps even more primitively, he had been born that night. Whatever the hell it was, he couldn't give it the credence of daytime logic, and started condemning himself for being so carried away by a pretty-faced girl named Mary.

He had only to wander around town a while, have a cup of coffee somewhere, pick up a carton of smokes for Nomi and take them to her. Then he would get on that damned plane and bug out. That's it, man, just plain bug out.

He had the coffee in a lunch counter where a few workingmen were getting their breakfast.

He moved on. He had time to kill. He looked in all the windows of all the curio shops, but bought nothing. He still had the flag in the ditty bag.

Catch me a living greyling, bring me a cup of blueberries.

It was time. All the clocks along the way said it was time. He stopped at the Pedro. It wasn't much different than the night. The jukebox played, a few natives huddled over their beers. Jim, for lack of anything else, ordered a shot of vodka. Tex whipped out the colorless bottle, poured the cheat shot, stole the change in a twinkling of an eye.

"I'm going over and see Nomi Mountain pretty quick," Jim said to the waspwaisted Texan.

"Yeah? Well, tell her hello from me, will you?"

"Anything you want to send along?" Jim asked.

"Naw, I'll be over there myself, maybe tomorrow," Tex said sympathetically with a low, do-gooder tone.

Jim smelt the vodka.

"What's the matter with it?" Tex asked, almost daring him.

"It smells like dogpiss," Jim said, "and it probably is."

Tex glared at him, but Jim only stared back with his little smile.

"I wouldn't give that stuff away to a human being," he added. "I wouldn't be able to stand myself. I couldn't sell it or steal the change or set up the klooches. I couldn't even touch it anymore than I could eat dogshit."

"Shut up," Tex said coldly, but his face was yellow. Jim was coming in close.

"If I ever sold this stuff or stole a nickel on account of it, I'd smell to myself like dogpiss," Jim said. "And I'm not a dog, I'm a man."

"Well, fuck you then," Tex snarled.

Jim threw the glass, vodka and all, into his face and waited as the Texan wilted.

"Whatsa matter? You drunk?" Tex grinned.

There was nothing to do but walk out. Outside he swore at himself. Reborn to insult a thieving bartender? Me? A man? Surely to God I can do better than that.

He went into the drugstore, bought cigarettes and some comic books and ambled across to the Federal Building.

The man at the desk took his name, noted a time, phoned, saying, "Nomi Mountain's got a visitor."

"Go ahead," the officer said, jerking his finger at the concrete stairway.

Jim said nothing. He didn't really understand what he was doing. He only knew it was a certitude, that he was required to see her once more, to be one with her this last time before she died. He knew she had died in his mind and been resurrected in his mind, and now he would see her in a flesh which would certainly die again and soon, and would it or would it not, in his mind or God's mind, ever be resurrected again? He didn't know.

Perhaps that's why he was forced and volunteering to go up these stairs now. In the distance he heard steel doors ringing shut, he heard guards' leather soles and heels popping like mallets on the cement floors, and somewhere off he heard an occasional girlish giggle.

He came to the head of the stairs and entered a corridor. It was very warm, airless, spotless, painted gray, and the sounds of the building echoed through it. He entered a room marked "Visitors," where two uniformed policemen who looked like nice, over-age high school football players not quite good enough for athletic scholarships sat. One was doodling with a pencil, the other looked up from a comic book.

"Yes, sir?" the comic booker asked.

"I'm to visit Nomi Mountain, your prisoner."

The guard smiled at Jim's phrasing. "Not mine," he said. "I'm just the man behind the badge."

Jim decided he was smarter than he looked, he'd better be a little more careful.

"She's on her way."

The door opened to his left. She was not quite the same. There was, or seemed to be, a very vital difference. Her face was composed, it did not smile. Her skin was brown, it did not bloom, her hair was dull and combed straight. Her walk was oppressed. She was almost the same, but not quite. She was subdued. She was trapped. She was adapted to the immediate environment. She played her personality like a poker hand.

"Hi, Nomi," he said.

He handed over the carton of smokes and the books. The doodler guard intercepted, checked to be sure no Luger or hand grenade was being passed through his eagle-eyed surveillance.

He hoped the guards would leave, as if he might have something he could say if they were alone, but the officers listened boredly, not even with curiosity.

Nomi was muddy-faced and muddy-mannered. Oh, he wished he'd left well enough alone, he wanted to remember her as beaten gold and fire. Her mouth was firm and unsmiling, competent, jailed. He knew how she felt.

There was space between them.

"I'll be going Outside today," he said

"Oh. O.K.," she said, her chin dropping a trifle. He needn't have said that. Why hurt her any more?

"It was a great summer," he said. "I learned a lot. Had a good time, I guess."

"The door was locked, Jim. I couldn't get in," she said. She too had nerves to be shed. "I tried."

"I know. Joe. Joe's all square."

They were talking in coded terms which they hoped would not be openly personal to the guards, who sat like loafing dogs.

"It's no secret," he said. "You've had a hard time. If they'll get you to a doctor and get you patched up, you'll be all right."

"I feel fine," she said. "I just needed a little rest. I'm doing fine."

He looked into her eyes and knew she was doing terribly. There was nothing else to say. One of the doodlers cleared his throat as they looked hungrily and silently and painfully at each other. His cough said, you're interrupting my Bugs Bunny story.

"Nomi, goodbye," he said, and crossed the nine feet in less than a second, enclosed her in his long, apelike arms and buried his mouth on hers. For just an instant she was confused. In all the time she'd spent in jail she'd never been kissed in an act of love. Even before she thought, her lips had become burning fires, her being flashed into his and for at least one second they were dissolved into one another.

And as the pressure faded from his heart, he heard the guards both yelling, "No personal contact!"

It was too late. He and she had made their contact. No guard could ever take it away. Jim stepped back. He saw the golden light flickering behind her sweetest smile, he saw the life glowing through her again, and knew that for once he'd done exactly the right thing for her. She could go ninety days just on that much. And from there. . . . *Et puis, et puis encore. . . .*

It was too far away to consider. Now it was enough to have broken through the walls and gotten from one to one, to make a single two. That was something a man could do in his world, in a lifetime.

Blue uniforms came across his vision. The last thing he ever saw of her was the laughter in her eyes.

Epilogue

FLIGHT

IN THE airport he checked through his ticket, had his little plastic bag properly tagged and, with time on his hands, and a pocketful of quarters he wandered across the lobby and worked through the rows of flight insurance machines.

$25,000 to his wife. $25,000 to Whoosiz. $25,000 to Kitty Cootchian. $25,000 to Joe. $25,000 to Nomi. $25,000 to Billy Bear. $25,000 to Filson. $25,000 to Blake. $25,000 to Robert Peary. $25,000 to Fred Chukochin. $25,000 to Mary Birchtree. $25,000 to Sonofgod. $25,000 to Dorthy Butterball. $25,000 to Grace Baudelaire. $25,000 to Nomi again. $25,000 to the cobbler. $25,000 to John Arblick. $25,000 to Whoosiz.

And he still had quarters left. Goddamn, he thought, what a break! And he went through the list again thinking that if the damned plane fell the whole town would have a winter's spree. What a deal! Suddenly he was a millionaire! And at the very worst the plane would make it.

He had never been aboard a four-engined jet. And what's more, he didn't want to be. But there was no other way home. He was stuck with the hard fact that if he stayed any longer in Fairbanks he would certainly perish, and if he flew on this giant piece of riveted aluminum he would likely perish too, but the insurance would cover everything and everyone would have a ball.

He sat next to a little old lady placidly chewing gum. A shill, he decided.

There was nothing to say, nor anything to hear. It is done, he thought, life and beauty die, death and ugliness die. Let me add my strength to increasing life, let me always do my best.

In the Seattle airport bar, where he had an hour's wait, he decided to spend his money. From Seattle to San Francisco would be another fast jump, but not fast enough. He ordered five stingers.

The San Francisco terminal had a Flight Bar which served stingers too; now all he had to go was the two hundred miles down the valley in a little stinger plane.

He squandered his last ten dollars, and as the PA system announced his plane, he went to the pay phone and called collect.

She answered exactly as she should.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, where are you?"

"In the city, but I'm off right now. Meet me. O.K.?"

"Sure," she said. "You sound funny."

"I'm the funniest kloochman this side of Fairbanks," he said. "See you."

Carrying the ditty bag, he ran, his old bony knees jerking under the singed, smoky twill-brown pants, his slippers flip-flopping, his shirt missing a couple of buttons, his unshaved beard sprouting everywhere. He was laughing too. He remembered it was his last chance to be a millionaire.

All was not lost, he decided, as he bumped his head on the low door of the little F-27; this plane was worn out as obviously the big jets weren't. This little bastard was less airworthy than anything he'd ever been on.

He rejoiced as it jerked, whistled, chattered, chittered and tore down the strip of blacktop and suddenly rammed up like a swallow into its place. Surely this one will pay off, he thought happily.

The stewardess in blue sat beside him and worked over her log. She wrote with elaborate curlycues and backhanded printing.

"Say, is it really true?" she asked shyly, "that the men from the states go up there and live with the native women?"

"Don't believe it," he said.

"The pilots on that run are always teasing us girls."

"No white man would ever demean himself that way," he declared. "Why, those girls are just fat slobs all covered with seal oil. They have these bones in their noses and they just talk 'yickety yickety.' "

"It makes my skin creep," she said.

The plane zipped like a trout down the valley and straight as an arrow it flew toward Fresno in the middle of its cotton and port wine grapes, in the middle of its sierras and coast range, and in the middle of its middle she rose and made her speech, "We are landing at Fresno, and thank you everybody."

The pilot didn't give a shit—he was skimming down over the just-ripening grapes in the torrid valley heat, and he was down on the ground taxiing madly to the terminal. He was a cab driver of the air in a hurry.

Well, Jim thought unhurriedly, his peapod stomach twisting in terror, time for idle chatter is past. Now is the time for that ex-millionaire Jim Carondelet to be happy, happy, happy!

Stuffing his old battered slippers in his back pocket, he rolled up his pants legs almost to the knees and, tearing open the paper around his Alaska flag, he flashed a broad, toothy smile for practice.

He looked out the open door.

Yes, there she was. Herself, thank God, alone. No, by God, the Whoosiz too. Well, that was fine.

Whipping out the flag with its eight golden stars on a field of blue, he tripped like a bony, silly cock stork down the steps to the hot blacktop. Waving the flag, hopping and skipping silently with wild gestures, performing at his very best, he did a hotfoot-barefoot-softshoe-with-flag across the intervening distance, a great grin frozen on his bearded and bitterlined face.

O and that idiotic big-boned compassionate ox of a beautiful redhaired woman, holding a breathing, blackhaired babe, in a cool pink dress, wasn't even smiling. That blue-eyed, redhaired wife was crying too.

(Continued from front flap)

of tuberculosis and too much living. Driven by his passion, he follows her into the inferno of her world.

On that wild and tender journey he discovers other realities—the Alaska of peaceful villages and immemorial ways, of awesome beauty, of raging fire in the great primeval forest. And, in himself, a boundless compassion for all those, like Nomi, defrauded and despoiled by civilization.

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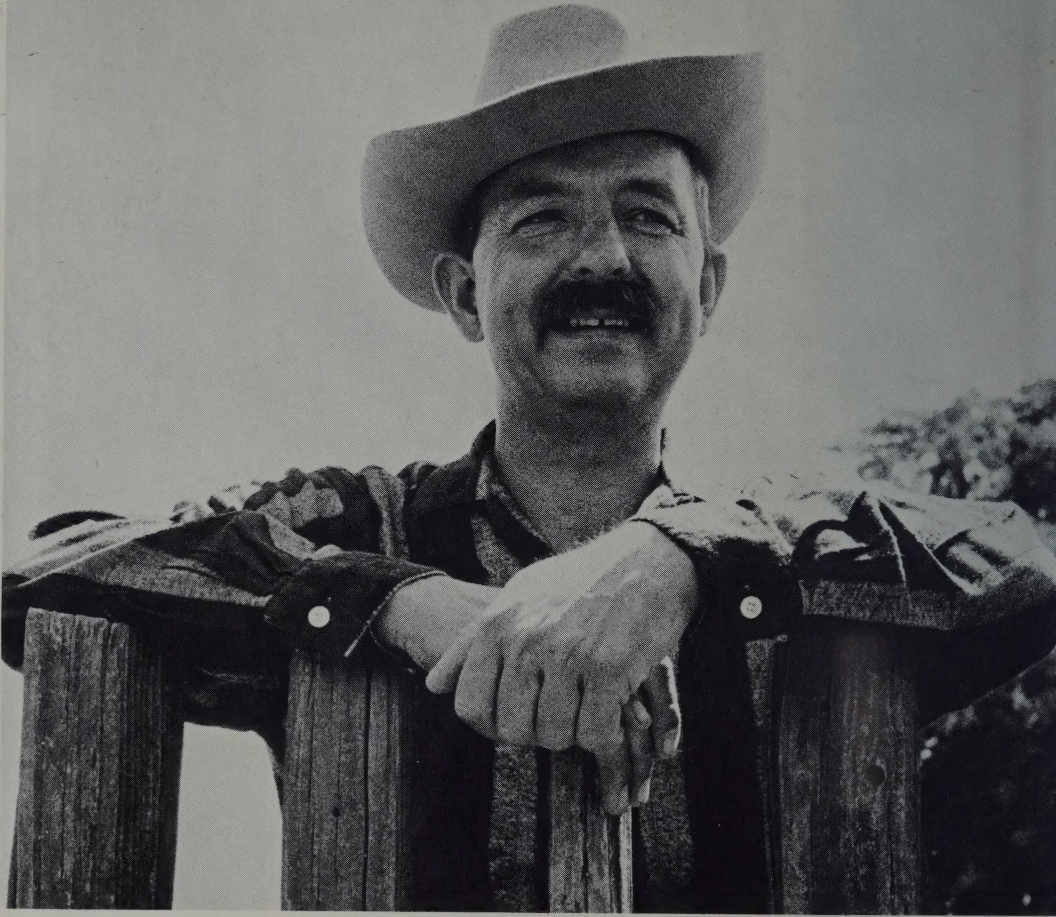
Is it a love story? A lament in a wild and zany key? An adventure? A morality tale? Perhaps something of all of these. With his remarkable descriptive gift, and a wondering love for human beings, Jack Curtis has evoked in *The Kloochman* a time and place like no other.

Jacket design by Paul Bacon



PHOTOGRAPH BY KIPP STEWART

Jack Curtis lives with his wife and four children in Big Sur, where he raises quarter horses, cows and Russian wild boar, and writes. Several collections of his verse have already been published. *The Kloochman* is his first published novel.